

“Who’s the President?”: Ghostwriting and Shifting Values in Literacy

Deborah Brandt

In 2003, while running for the Democratic nomination for president, Congressman Dennis Kucinich criticized other candidates for hiring collaborators to help them write their campaign books. “If a president has a ghostwriter,” he asked, “who’s the president?” (qtd. in Meadows 12). With his jabbing question Kucinich could remind the public that he was the sole author of his own campaign book, implying that he was more genuine, more commanding, harder-working, maybe even more literate, and certainly more authoritative than his competitors. Of course he, along with most of the public, had to know that presidents, like other executives, rely all the time on speechwriters and other assistants to do their writing, just as we know that the book industry increasingly relies on the fame of national politicians and other celebrities to produce ghostwritten books that will boost sales (Hitt). Nevertheless, Kucinich could needle other candidates for misusing the prestige of book publishing to enhance their images while reserving for himself the prestige of real authorship, including a direct and reliable connection between the man and his words.

This incident suggests how ghostwriting (and its critics) can both clarify and complicate values that circulate along with writing and literacy in this culture. For now, we might define ghostwriting as taking on substantial parts of a composing process for which someone else, not you, will be credited—whether by byline, signature, institutional title, oral delivery, or in some other way. As we will see, ghostwriting especially highlights power exchanges between writing and social structures and also illuminates assumptions about underlying reading and writing processes

Deborah Brandt is professor of English at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, where she teaches undergraduate writing and graduate courses in literacy and contemporary writing studies. Her work focuses on social contexts of literacy, including its systems of access and reward. She is author of *Literacy as Involvement: The Acts of Writers, Readers, and Texts* (1990) and *Literacy in American Lives* (2001). Her newest project, *Writing Now*, tracks the ascendancy of writing over reading as a second stage of mass literacy.

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that enable such exchanges. In the case of the ghostwritten campaign books, for instance, we see how “a name”—that is, a person with currency, social importance, celebrity, or notoriety—can endow a piece of writing with power. The politicians’ status brings status to the writing; they are connected to it by name, and it is this connection that authorizes the writing and warrants the reading of it. From this perspective, the actual working out of the words, the writing, is treated with lesser importance: the writer is a mere instrument in completing the connection, a presence not considered meaningful to the reading. Not only ghostwritten books but much of the writing we encounter in bureaucratic society participates in this power arrangement, whereby words are made significant not by having been written but by the status of the official issuer.

At the same time, though, writing—particularly but not exclusively literary writing—enjoys its own prestige. Through the sometimes convoluted history of literacy in this culture and the ideologies it produces, writing is associated with creativity, talent, intellect, sensibility, knowledge—in a word, authority. In general, writing is a desirable skill, a somewhat scarce skill, respected for its difficulty and the achievement it represents, particularly when it results in publication. Writing benefits most of all from the cultural prestige of reading. Because many forms of reading over time have been marked with high cultural value, this value has come to extend to those who can write in those forms. In this climate, then, writing may bequeath its high status to an individual person who engages in it. One can “make a name” through writing. Writing also is its own verifiable record of a powerful engagement with literacy and all of its goodness—including, often, the human growth that is presumed to be entailed in a writing experience. This achievement of the writing per se certifies the writer and warrants the reading. Writing then can be an independent source of social value and power and, with some exceptions, enhances the stature of anyone who claims authorship.

These two different valences in writing—personal power and writing power—are at play in Kucinich’s gibe. The other presidential candidates undoubtedly wanted their ghostwritten books to indicate their prominent political status—their arrival as names on the national scene. However, Kucinich accuses them instead of self-aggrandizement, of making unearned claims on the social value of writing in order to puff themselves up. He invokes the social value of writing to insinuate shallowness, dependency, even deception (all damaging qualities in a leader) on the part of his rivals. On his part, Kucinich can lay claim to a double status: well known enough to publish and authoritative enough to do his own writing. He invites a different kind of reading of his book, one where the actual words really do count and the presence of the writer is meaningful. In this way, he signals his own integrity, authenticity, reliability, an earned entitlement to the attention of his audience (all positive qualities in a leader). In his barb, Kucinich recruits underlying values associated with reading, writing, and literacy to advance a political campaign.

This essay examines ghostwriting and criticisms of it for what they can say about how the status of writing operates as a site of power. The focus will be on both the experiences of individual ghostwriters in a range of corporate and government settings and on recent controversies that have erupted around ghostwriting practices in such areas as the law and medical publishing. As we will see, ghostwriting depends explicitly on the elaborate borrowing and lending of status, including the status of writing itself, and it is in the handling of these exchanges that both the effectiveness of ghostwriting and its controversies will usually be found. Further, because ghostwriting can both artfully exploit and at times offensively violate normal assumptions about writing and reading, it opens a window on the ways that social institutions and organizations rely on a normative literacy to run smoothly. Beliefs and values developed as part of mass literacy have come to saturate social systems, affecting the sense of how things work or should work. These tacit assumptions become visible in the practice of ghostwriting. So my focus in this essay will be on how the status of writing is recruited to institutional, organizational, and personal interests and how that process registers in the experiences of actual ghostwriters. I then will consider how normative beliefs about the status of writing appear in critiques of ghostwriting. My aim is not to pass judgments on ghostwriting, good or bad, but rather to explore the sometimes ineffable but potent cultural values that have accrued to writing and how those cultural values are themselves turned into rhetorical prerogative and transactional advantage. Such attention is especially important these days, when the centrality of written communication in economic, social, and political life is on the rise. That ghostwriting is also on the rise at the same time is worthy of observation (Posner). How the prestige of writing is being harnessed in these new, writing-intensive times could transform the meanings, values, and practices of literacy, not to mention institutions and organizations that have come to rely on them.

SITUATING THIS STUDY

Ghostwriters have been the focus of attention in a number of areas, including political science, speech communication, literary studies, and biography. Lois J. Einhorn (“Ghosts Unmasked,” “Ghostwriting,” “Ghosts Talk”) provides fascinating profiles of speechwriters in high echelons of government, and Jennie Erdal supplies a book-length account of her long-term role as a ghostwriter for a quirky public figure and author. Lively debates over ghostwriting have been conducted among scholars in speech communication, especially regarding the methodological challenges it poses to those rhetorical critics who are used to drawing on an author’s background to account for the style of a text (Bormann, “Ghostwriting” and “Ethics”; Nichols; Medhurst). Others have explored the effects of ghostwriting on writer-reader relationships, particularly the trust that is crucial to certain kinds of written communi-

cation. Linda Riley and Stuart C. Brown surveyed reader perceptions and attitudes, revealing sophisticated public awareness of the phenomenon of ghostwriting. Work by John J. Auer, Donald K. Smith, and Larry Witham directs attention to the situationality of ghostwriting, particularly the institutional roles of the people who depend on ghosted work, their motivations, the understanding or assumptions of their audiences, their manner of involvement with the writing, and their capacity to take responsibility for it. All of the studies cited above could be usefully mined for what they say about the ethical and interpretive habits that underlie common acts of writing and reading.

Research on workplace writing is also central to my investigation here, especially critical and genre studies that bring attention to the heavily constitutive role of writing in organizational processes. Workplace texts do not merely communicate messages but are integrated as active agents in work sites, organizing collective attention, shaping facts, and managing power differentials (Bazerman; Latour, Woolgar, and Salk; Longo; Miller). Works by Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford, Geoffrey Cross, and others have illuminated widespread collaborative writing in institutional settings, while William J. Kinsella points out how, in a corporate world, even individual composing acts occur as part of “institutionalized collective action” (303). Dorothy Winsor (“Ordering,” *Writing Power*) analyzes work orders in an engineering firm to show how the writing of technicians is rendered invisible (and not always happily) as it is absorbed into the work products of engineers. Similarly, Jim Henry and Jennifer Daryl Slack, David James Miller, and Jeffrey Doak have illuminated how the complex authoring achievements of technical writers can be occluded by impoverished conceptions of discourse and communication that hold sway in many technical and scientific settings (although Susan Katz’s study of writing by a novice bureaucrat shows how a writer’s colleagues can recognize and appreciate rhetorical craft). My study extends this line of investigation by considering the peculiar case of ghostwriting, in which, typically, subordinates write not *for* higher-ups but *as if they are* higher-ups and deliberately for the aggrandizement of higher-ups. As we will see, power, including the power of writing, can work oddly in these circumstances. This essay keeps a steady focus on the status of writing itself as a resource in the production of texts, assuming that organizations are themselves embedded in the wider arrangements of mass literacy that influence internal writing practices.

WRITING CAN BE SOLD AND AUTHORSHIP CAN BE BOUGHT

Perhaps the most profound aspect of the status of writing that ghostwriting foregrounds is its commercial value, unique among the so-called language arts. Through copyright law, writing is recognized as a form of labor that can function within employment relations (Angel and Tannenbaum). The section of U.S. copyright law

marked “Works Made for Hire” covers workplace writing as well as special projects sought through contract. Some scholars trace the “work made for hire” provision of U.S. copyright law to the needs of the federal government in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to clarify its control over the written work produced in its burgeoning bureaucracies (Angel and Tannenbaum 225–27). Other scholars put the origins of authorship transfer much further back, in early systems of patronage by which scribes and scholars were hired by benefactors for specific projects, or to early eighteenth-century England, where publishers and printers by power of their guilds were declaring ownership over the literary content of their material products (Rose; Saunders). In any event, the current U.S. legal code reads: “In cases of works made for hire, the employer or commissioning party is considered the author.” On the one hand, this provision underscores the indivisibility between writers and their work (one can give for hire only that which one controls). On the other hand, the law makes authorship, at least as a legal status, thoroughly severable from actual composing. You may be considered the author without having written a word. This is what allows a public personality to put his or her byline on the cover of a commissioned book while often relegating the name of the ghostwriter to a smaller font or to the acknowledgment page or, in some cases, to oblivion. And it is within this climate that superiors in a workplace may put their names over letters, speeches, or reports that others have produced without being considered plagiarists.

The “work made for hire” provision draws on a longstanding U.S. legal tradition that recognizes the rights of individuals and firms to enter into contractual agreements. Authorial rights adhere to employers through their right to control willing employees: through the prerogatives that accompany financial investment, higher status, and the provision of space and tools, as well as through the exercise of oversight and/or ultimate responsibility for the writing. When litigation has erupted around the “work made for hire” provision, judicial decisions have hinged on determining what the contract says as well as who pays, provides, or controls (Burk; Wishner). This idea of the author as the controller rather than the creator of a work is obviously less familiar than, maybe even alien to, the normal sense of the author as the one who actually carries out the writing. Of course, the mystique of ghostwriting depends on readers’ crediting creation to the controller, even when the writing emanates from complex institutions or organizations. While some observers attribute this person-focused habit either to the cult of individual authorship or to the cult of individual leadership rampant in Western, bourgeois, capitalist culture (Haiman; Heymann; Seeger), the fact remains that even when ghostwriting is assumed, as readers we have few literate choices but to attribute authorship to the person who takes credit for a text.

The “work made for hire” provision is just one small, exceptional part of copyright law, however. For the most part, copyright law does, in fact, define the author

as the person who does the work of writing, and this is the figure we associate most readily with copyright protection (or at least we have to this point). In a landmark 1976 copyright case, *Community for Creative Non-Violence v. Reid*, Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall observed, “As a general rule, the author is the party who actually creates the work, that is, the person who translates an idea into a fixed, tangible expression” (qtd. in VerSteeg 1326). When disputes have broken out under the general provisions of copyright law, courts have appealed to a much more writer-centered set of criteria to determine authorship, looking for evidence of originality, expression, and communication—criteria, in other words, that adhere closely to the act of writing itself. Here we have a different yet equally longstanding legal protection in play: protection of the rights of individuals to control and benefit from the fruits of their own intellectual labor.¹

These competing concepts of authorship, one associated with the power of contractual control and the other with the power of the act of writing itself, animate Congressman Kucinich’s “Who’s really the boss?” question. But, as we will see below, these concepts also run deeply through the practical routines of workaday ghostwriters, accounting for the elaborate and delicate negotiations that they carry out with an employer/client and the ways they manage their own sense of ownership over the words they write.

The testimonies of ghostwriters serve as an exploratory installment in a larger project in which I am trying to track the rising importance of writing as a mass skill in the United States. The project examines the growing involvement of writing in economic production, its high-stakes value as both a means of production and an output of production, something in which much is invested and upon which much is traded, lost, and won (Brandt). How writing and writers are used in the workaday world matters to the meanings that literacy is taking on under these new conditions. Over the past two years I have interviewed forty people in a range of occupations in the public and private sectors, all of whom write for at least 30 percent of the typical working day and sometimes much more. They work at various levels in various-sized organizations, ranging from large corporations and government agencies to single-owner freelancer businesses. In the interviews, people discuss the writing they do in and out of work, how they learned to do it, and what effects it has on them and others. The research is still ongoing, but I was surprised by the amount of ghostwriting that was reported as well as the considerable effort and reflection that went into it.²

Not surprisingly, recognizing their employers as the controlling agents, pleasing them, or giving them what they want is essential to the ghostwriters’ sense of what constitutes responsible or effective ghostwriting (and no doubt job security!). But there is more to it than that. They need to recognize the client or employer as

not just the controller or material provider but also the creator, the author in the normative sense. This attribution is essential to their idea of what constitutes ethical ghostwriting. The goodness of their ghostwriting (what makes it worth their wage and makes it honest) depends on locating the status of authorship in the mind or person of the client/employer. To that end, ghostwriters spend considerable effort trying to elicit and honor everything from the ideas to the prose style of the authors-employers. Even further, though, and intriguingly so, in describing their practices ghostwriters seem at the same time to suggest that part of their art involves bringing an author into being: as one ghostwriter put it, creating “an improved version of her,” or, as another facetiously put it, “saying what he would say if he knew what he was talking about.” At yet another level, however, most ghostwriters also said they feel an authorial stake in and intellectual ownership over the words that they write and at times derive pleasure, status, and growth from this writing even as their role remains hidden from the public.

All but one of the ghostwriters I interviewed said it was important to ascertain their client’s or employer’s *thoughts* or *ways of thinking* so these can serve as the origin of the writing.³ “It took me a long time,” said a ghostwriter for a CEO of a major institution, “to understand how his mind operates.” This need usually entails meeting with the clients or employers, interviewing them, reading their previous work, or, in some cases, audiotaping conversations. For example, one freelancer who writes personal newsletter columns for banking executives said she always interviews her clients first:

I try the interview technique of picking up themes. If it’s important they will typically repeat themselves or if it’s a thought they’ve had it won’t be hard to catch because they will emphasize it in some way.

A government speechwriter described a similar process:

For me it was largely a question of paying attention to people like [R.], who was a bright guy and by the time I spent ten or fifteen minutes with him I usually had a pretty good idea of what he wanted to say. Then it was just an iterative process to get things down.

A marketing director for a health maintenance organization communicated regularly with doctors, clinics, and community members under the name of the organization’s medical director:

It’s odd. Sometimes it’s difficult. You almost have to think like they think. Okay this is a medical director writing this letter. How would a medical director write this letter? It’s gotten easier because you just know how. It’s the same medical director I’ve been writing for for a number of years so I just know how he’s going to want it to read and what he is not going to want to say.

A legislative aide described how he worked back and forth with his boss when he drafted letters to constituents, calibrating his judgments with her feedback:

I'm writing as if I were her, which makes it important to be quick learning about what a person's moods are and how they feel about certain issues because if you don't, you're going to be constantly rewriting and struggling with that. I will put a thought forth. Is this true? And sometimes she'll say, no, I'm not comfortable with that. And sometimes she'll go, yeah, that's exactly how it is. Every time the "exactly" happens or the "no" happens, I learn more about it and the "no's" become fewer.

Others reported similar kinds of calibrations. A law clerk told me that she read a number of cases decided by the judge who employed her as a way to draft rulings under his name and studied closely the revisions and edits he would return to her "so I could learn from them." A government speechwriter said he tried to witness the delivery of the speeches he prepares. "If I'm writing a speech for somebody it's really important to go and hear their speech so I can hear how they use the material," he said. "If they change something, I'll make sure the next time that it's written that way." Concomitantly, several said ghostwriting became difficult when they did not get adequate access to a client's thoughts. "The worst thing is when somebody is not very expressive," said one freelance ghostwriter. "What flips this guy's switch?" A communications specialist spoke of a generic "leadership style" he would resort to if he did not have access to an executive for whom he needed to write. Ghostwriters expend a great deal of energy trying to capture the "signature" style of thought or values of an author-client. Through the sharing of thoughts or revealing of systems of thought, clients lend their status or position to the ghostwriter. This is the site of authorization which serves both practical and ethical functions for the ghostwriter.

When this exchange occurs and ghostwriters are authorized to write as if they were other persons, composing prerogatives emerge. Perhaps the most subtle description of this process was offered by a legislative aide who, when he writes under the name of the legislator who employs him, actually borrows (and feels responsible for) the status of the professional field in which the legislator works in private life. This revered professional status often serves inentional purposes for him:

We [i.e., the aides] understand that [. . .] [members of the legislator's profession] are very trusted. They are one of the most trusted professions out there. So writing in the capacity of [. . .] [her profession] I have to reach into my thoughts on how as [her] I understand an issue.

At the same time that ghostwriters described the controlling and authoring role played by employers, they also talked about the powers they as writers lend in the process, which often include bringing an author into being as part of their creative labor or skill. Here there were references to a "puppet quality" or "a producer-director role" or "scriptwriting." The following is a particularly telling observation

in which the writer becomes the controller of the purported author, for his own good. The statement is from a freelancer who writes mostly for the banking industry:

I try to make people smarter. Well, they are probably very intelligent. They are running a financial institution. But I try to use quotes that they probably wouldn’t think of. I try to pull things together structurally where they might have these thoughts but they probably didn’t think of them in a cogent way. That’s my job, to take what’s in their head and pull it through a process so the words work and somebody reading it says, yeah, that Bob’s a great guy, he’s out there for our benefit.

Not surprisingly, having superior knowledge of a topic or superior rhetorical acumen often authorized a writer to take control of the author. The legislative aide said he could sometimes “overlay my perspective” in texts written in the name of the legislator when addressing topics about which he had more knowledge. Another interviewee observed, “I’m fascinated to hear my ideas play out through an entirely different voice from my own.” Here we see how the status associated with writing and the writer buys purchase for the ghostwriter, evoking and authorizing the kind of creative author that Justice Marshall had in mind. The ghostwriter’s status as “the party who actually creates the work, that is, the person who translates an idea into a fixed, tangible expression” also was routinely acknowledged and even joked about within the ghostwriter-employer relationship. The law clerk I interviewed found it “exciting” when another judge cited an opinion that she had written, even though, of course, her name was not on it. “I kidded around with [the judge I worked for] once or twice on that one,” she said. A freelancer with advanced education in both science and communication did extensive drafting of academic articles for a professor who had become brain injured in an accident. The ghostwriter found satisfaction when the articles she worked on were accepted for publication:

I tried to be an improved version of [the client]. I tried to be more rigorous in the reasoning. How do you turn that off in yourself? For pride’s sake I felt I had to make it the best. The articles got accepted for publication so I guess they turned out well.

Along with expressions of pride of ownership came expressions, interestingly, of both authorial responsibility and abdication of authorial responsibility. These mixed experiences could occur as part of the same writing event because, as I have been arguing, they emerge within the flow of power from the status of writing into the employee-employer relationship. Consider this account of a speechwriter for a high-profile CEO. The ghostwriter called this elaborate borrowing and lending of authorship “oddly powerful”:

First, he is saying what you wrote and that has a weird puppet feel to it. But then you’re also in an audience surrounded by people who are reacting to what you have written for the first time and nobody knows that you wrote it. And it’s humbling too because you realize, well, I really have to put a lot of thought into what I’m doing

because if he goes out and says these things, he's taking responsibility for those positions and I should put as much thought into those positions as he would on his own. So I would say I've gotten access to the trials and troubles of leadership and have an appreciation for not being a leader and not having full responsibility. It's easy to write a speech and say, okay, you go get heckled. I'm just going to hide back in my office.

Of course, there are limits to the ghostwriter's control, which, despite the power of writing, always remains tied to hierarchical arrangements. Interestingly, the CEO just mentioned would sometimes signal displeasure with a ghostwritten message by exposing its status in public and distancing himself from the words. Here we see that when a powerful name withdraws support, when someone "pulls rank" so to speak, writing can be emptied of its power. The ghostwriter recounts:

Early on I was at an event where I had written remarks for him and he stood up front and said, okay, I've got these remarks that somebody wrote for me and I probably should read those but after that I'm going to tell you some other things. [. . .] If it [the writing] doesn't sound like him, if it doesn't sound like something he wants to say, he'll often ignore it completely or if he does use it, he'll make it fairly plain that he didn't write it.

In this case, the executive's relinquishing of purported authorship was a way of putting the writer in his place. Control was asserted not by taking ownership of the writing but by re-separating from the ghostwriter and demoting the writing. Such re-separation or demotion of writing perhaps reached its ultimate degree in the following incident relayed by the legislative aide:

One of the senators fired all four of his staff last Christmas, right near last Christmas, because they were trying to tell him what to do. And in part they were trying to do that through the writing and he would have none of that.

In this section I have tried to show how the value of writing, its transactional flow within employee-employer relations, and the competing definitions of the author that this value brings into being, manifest themselves in ghostwriters' descriptions of their routine composing processes and their working relationships with client-employers. The subtle and sometimes strange borrowing and lending of status on which ghostwriting depends include management of the status of writing as a discrete locus of power. Especially important to the success of these transactions, both pragmatic and ethical, is the prestige of authorship, which is central to the mystique of ghostwriting and often important to the satisfaction of an individual ghostwriter. But it is also a power that can convolute and at times compromise the subordinate writer's work. The prestige of authorship, especially expert authorship, is exactly what must be given away in the ghostwriting exchange and yet it seems inseparable from the experience of writing. What appears here as a practical com-

posing issue for workaday writers will, as we will see later, reappear in different forms in ethical critiques of certain kinds of ghostwriting.

LITERACY AND SCARCITY

Another aspect of the status of writing that ghostwriting foregrounds is the fact that literacy functions in a system of scarcity. Time is one such scarcity motivating a lot of paid ghostwriting. Political leaders, CEOs, and other executives are typically responsible for massive amounts of written communication (from annual reports to speeches to correspondence with constituents or clients) that is beyond their individual capacity to produce, especially given other obligations. So they outsource to ghostwriters. To the consternation of some observers, writing is even being outsourced these days by people in writing professions, such as attorneys, authors, academics, and journalists (Hitt). The time-consuming nature of writing is out of balance with the amount of writing required; as a consequence, hired writers enter the breach. Knowledge can be another scarcity. Decision makers (for instance, state governors) often oversee complex institutions or operations about which they cannot have omniscient or in-depth knowledge even though they have ultimate responsibility. A ghostwriter may serve as a researcher, knowledge producer, and/or knowledge analyst for such a leader—a “ghost thinker” as one presidential speechwriter called himself (Einhorn, “Ghostwriting” 125). Knowledge scarcity also can motivate private citizens to seek formal or informal writing help in, say, filing legal documents or composing an appeal of an immigration ruling. Skill scarcity, too, is a major motivator for ghostwriting. To the extent that writing is treated as a talent in this society, and an unequally distributed talent at that, people who need more writing talent than they themselves possess may seek the services of ghostwriters. Knowledge and/or skill scarcity lies behind the success of so-called term-paper mills. And, as communication and publicity have become more consequential to politics, commerce, and many other spheres, wordsmiths have become as important as attorneys or accountants in terms of the specialized assistance they can render. The high cultural value that writing carries, its capacity to influence outcomes, and its tendency to make its able users look good all create incentive for borrowing others’ skills. Skill scarcity also results from unequal access to literacy and language education. Many people in society are required to produce writing or writing in a particular language that they are incapable of executing on their own (Kalman). Scribes, translators, literacy coaches, and ghostwriters often help in these circumstances. Disabilities of various kinds also can impair skills needed to conduct composition on one’s own; certain kinds of brain damage, for instance, can make the ordering of textual language impossible or interfere with the mental focus that writing requires. Without the com-

bination of the high priority and value of writing and such scarcities as those of time, knowledge, skill, and access (and the power dynamics these scarcities create), ghostwriting would not be such a common practice.

While sheer scarcity of time goes a long way in explaining the economy of ghostwriting, there is also symbolic value in the association between writing and time. When someone takes the time to write, it can signal attentiveness, care, involvement with the recipients of the writing, which can be important in situations when social and/or diplomatic relationships matter. Writing is often associated with the writer's thoughts, and so being addressed, particularly in private correspondence, is a visible record that the reader was in the writer's thoughts during the time of composing. Likewise, the writer can be held in the reader's thoughts during reading. These exchanges can permit a claim to intimacy; psychologically, reading or writing can be satisfactory substitutes for spending time together. The connection between time and thought also lies behind the perceived effort required in writing: someone who puts time into writing is presumed to have earned something from the thinking, whether that be knowledge, clarity, certainty, etc. In other words, the writing act itself, given the time and effort involved, can help to authorize the writer and credential the message. These associations among time, writing, thought, and effort can be especially important in written evaluations, when the writer has been presumed to have taken time to review and reflect on an applicant, a proposal, or whatever is being evaluated. No doubt the social or organizational status of the writer, his or her reputation or standing, matters to the status of a message, including an evaluation. But the psychological associations among writing, time, effort, and attention mean that writing itself, its symbolic import, is a value added in any text. In ghostwriting, this symbolic power is recouped for the interests of the employer/client: not only does the client save actual time by employing the ghostwriting but often still gets credit for having put in that time, at least in the psychological esteem of the reader.

One common example of this symbolic value involves the ubiquitous thank-you letters that go out in bulk to, say, donors to a foundation. Such letters are typically ghostwritten, then printed on fine linen stationery, then signed, perhaps by a real foundation president or perhaps by a machine with a fountain pen rigged up to imitate the president's signature, and then, finally, bulk mailed with first-class postage. Such letters can have their desired effect only because they can be read singly and privately by readers primed to treat personal letters in a certain way and thus primed to feel grateful to the foundation president for taking the time to acknowledge their donations. (An executive I interviewed who signs many ghostwritten thank-you letters told me that on occasion he actually recopies in his own handwriting an entire ghostwritten letter to be sent to particularly important donors. Handwriting is an extra sign of his presence. The donation of his precious time and attention

reciprocates the financial contribution. The value of writing itself is central to the success of this exchange.)

Skill scarcity can have a similar symbolic value beyond its real measure. Because writing in our society is, at least in some contexts, elevated as a rare talent or an expression of unusual intelligence, those who engage in it well (or ostensibly so) can derive status from that perception. An effective piece of writing can boost someone’s reputation or claim to entitlement. Effective writing makes the writer seem more trustworthy, authentic, or deserving. This accumulated cultural association between literacy and intelligence, goodness, and deservingness is of incalculable social value, a value much exploited in the economy of ghostwriting. As with time scarcity, the symbolic value of skill scarcity is recouped in the employer’s interest. In the ghostwriting relationship, power is consolidated when the symbolic status of writing joins the organizational status of the employer/client. Scarcity is transacted into surplus.

Before leaving the topic of scarcity, however, I want to explore a more unusual but no less revealing dynamic in which the real and symbolic values of writing can flow in a different direction: to the less powerful. That is, at times, through ghostwriting, the status of writing can be used to reroute power within organizations. This happens when a person with time and skills for literacy lends these resources to someone who has less. One of the people I interviewed, who was employed at the time of the interview as a translator and interpreter, volunteered his time outside of work helping fellow Southeast Asian immigrants with their necessary written communication. He prepared personal letters sent to family members who still lived in the home country as well as official correspondence with the U.S. government over such matters as immigration, citizenship, employment, housing, or social welfare. Because government bureaucracies presume a level of English written literacy that far exceeds the knowledge and skills of many of the new Southeast Asian immigrants, the people in this particular case often did not apply for benefits to which they were otherwise legally entitled, or they would often be denied benefits because of paperwork errors. As a ghostwriter of family letters and official correspondence, this volunteer explained that his work involved far more than merely transcribing oral messages into written messages or first language into second language. Rather, working in two languages, he needed to lend his neighbors a textualized voice, a form of authorship involving both control and creativity. He often also lent knowledge of government bureaucracy as well as writing equipment and supplies. (In regard to these points, see Judy Kalman’s book for a fascinating study of contemporary scribes in Mexico City.)

In one extended account this volunteer ghostwriter discussed a particularly consequential appeal that he wrote for a neighbor seeking to reverse a denial of unemployment benefits. Because the volunteer ghostwriter had had experience with

unemployment and at one time worked as a case manager for a social welfare program, he was able to use writing to lend an institutional way of thinking to his neighbor. Whereas subordinate ghostwriters I interviewed would glean organizational thinking from the employer/client and use it to guide writing, here the volunteer ghostwriter lends his neighbor the necessary thoughts that will make his case effective. Through literacy, he is able to redistribute institutional power by lending bureaucratic ways of thinking. He explained:

Someone who doesn't know the process, the requirement, and doesn't speak the language, if you don't tell them what they need to say, their case will be denied. [The man I wrote for] knew nothing. In the letter, I knew what to say to stress the point. I was laid off once so I knew the correct process and procedure to keep records and what to do if something is wrong. Plus, after I was laid off I got a job working as a case manager helping people who were laid off so I had quite a bit of experience in that field. So I knew what points to stress and the correct person to write to directly to get more accurate information. It was fortunate. [My friend's] denial was reversed and he received his benefits.

In this circumstance ghostwriting serves not to consolidate institutional power but to redistribute it by blocking the negative repercussions that usually come with low literacy. In many contexts in society, judgments are made about people on the basis of their literacy or language. Foreign identity signaled in language particularly can be a grounds for exclusion or rejection. But when, through ghostwriting, an outsider can sound as if he or she is an insider, knowledgeable about the bureaucracy and fluent in English, those systems of exclusion are confused and made less potent. Potential discrimination based on literacy assumptions is blocked. In this case, the ghostwriter volunteers his literacy in the service of his neighbors, sharing his resources of language and education in the same way he might share money or food. It is, most would agree, an admirable act. Yet we also can see in this example the potential subversiveness of ghostwriting when it is used to redistribute power, when it harnesses the status of writing to disrupt the social order. As we will see next, fear of disruption to the social order lies behind many critiques of ghostwriting.

GHOSTWRITING AND THE SOCIAL ORDER: CASES OF CONTROVERSY

So far we have mostly examined the peculiar power dynamics of ghostwriting as they emerge in accounts of workaday ghostwriters—people who, as part of their work, draft letters, speeches, reports, public relations columns, and other documents that are published or distributed under someone else's name. These forms of ghostwriting are accepted as necessary to the busy production pace of government, corporations, and other organizations. Ghostwriters function like other assistants who help organizational leaders do their jobs more effectively. Deception is not the goal.

At the same time, we have seen that in such routine acts of ghostwriting, sometimes tricky negotiations must be undertaken to handle the status of writing as a site of power. Such management engages ethical response on the part of ghostwriters who work in contexts where the commercial value of literacy and its scarcity press into their considerations. Balancing tensions between control and creativity is a constant rhetorical pressure for ghostwriters. And while deception is not the goal, the mystique of ghostwriting always depends on the way that the work of writing is transacted into value, including, importantly, symbolic value for the purported author.

In this final section I set my focus in a different location: on critiques of ghostwriting, where many of these same issues play out in somewhat different form. I must say at the outset that this discussion is not meant in any way as an evaluative gloss on earlier sections of this essay nor, certainly, on the ethics of the ghostwriters who were interviewed as part of this project. None of the people I interviewed were engaged in the controversial forms of ghostwriting that will be treated in this section. Rather, I examine some of the more flagrant cases of ghostwriting, because they bring to the surface certain normative assumptions about reading and writing that ride along as part of institutional practice and wider social life. Critics of ghostwriting, or at least certain forms of it, find the practice deceptive and damaging to the integrity of literacy and consequently to institutions that rely on literacy. Where ghostwriting seems to overstep its bounds, it is seen to threaten social order by surreptitiously seducing and exploiting the trust that people put in literacy, their own and that of others.

Consider first the controversy surrounding legal ghostwriting, a practice that is part of a new movement toward the unbundling of legal services (Walther). Sometimes clients do not need or cannot afford full legal representation for whatever problem they face. So some law firms break down services into discrete parts and offer them for flat fees to clients who otherwise will appear in court *pro se*, that is, as self-represented, without counsel. Writing of briefs, appeals, and other documents is a popular unbundled service (as the scarcity principle might predict). A behind-the-scenes lawyer will ghostwrite court papers for a client to sign and file. However, some judges’ responses to this practice have been sharply negative. (For backgrounds and a range of reactions to these practices, see Goldschmidt; Rothermich; Weeman.) For one thing, ghostwriting seems to elude some of the bedrock responsibility that lawyers have toward the judicial system, namely candor and accountability. Some commentators worry that by writing briefs without disclosing their authorship, lawyers might be tempted to do a slipshod job and get away with it, never facing the consequences of mistakes, omissions, or malpractice that come with signed work. This concern suggests how the claim to authorship serves as a crucial mechanism for the display and enforcement of professional accountability and openness. Professions such as the law not only borrow from the status of writing to bestow status

on members but also have come to rely on writing as a site to enforce and make manifest their professional standards. It is interesting to observe that even though a legal brief is a work made for hire (i.e., clients buy the writing services of attorneys), many courts are reluctant to recognize the transfer of authorship to a (lowly) client. When professionals sell away authorship—especially to the less wealthy or less powerful—they destabilize professional codes and disrupt professional compacts that are carried through institutionalized acts of reading and writing. They also potentially disrupt their exclusiveness as a profession.

Legal ghostwriting also collides with the custom of the court to be lenient with self-represented litigants. When lay people serve as their own lawyers, including, presumably, handling their own legal writing, their amateur status is recognized, and if mistakes are made they are overlooked or repaired or taken into consideration as part of the administration of justice. Although some judges claim they can always spot professionally prepared papers and so are not bothered by ghostwriting services, others maintain that some degree of uncertainty will always be introduced when the authorship of legal papers is unclear, an uncertainty that is disruptive to relationships and processes upon which justice depends. According to critics of legal ghostwriting, a professionally prepared piece of writing misrepresents the person appearing before a judge: litigants can appear more legally literate than they really are. This obfuscation can interfere with justice in at least a couple of ways. First, filing professionally prepared papers under one's own name may make a person actually less deserving of leniency because that person is less than fully *pro se*, self-represented. In other words, legal ghostwriting may give people an advantage to which they are not entitled. On the other hand, the quality of the writing may make litigants appear more in control of the case than they are, putting them at risk of higher expectations by the judge or other representatives of the court. As a result, they may be accorded less leniency than they might really need and deserve. In any case, justice is threatened when one appears more literate than one really is. This controversy exposes underlying social values associated with literacy that run tacitly through the judicial system (i.e., high literacy skills carry favorable connotations and low literacy skills must be accommodated). (For fascinating historical perspectives on illiteracy and the courts, see Stevens.) Interestingly, those who defend legal ghostwriting do so in part on the grounds that it levels the playing field: first, because unbundled legal services expand access to legal aid, and second, because lending literacy (in this case, specialized legal discourse) to a lay person blunts the usual power advantage that accompanies full professional representation. For instance, in "In Defense of Ghostwriting," Jona Goldschmidt writes, "If lawyers lose some of their advantage over *pro se* litigants because of ghostwriting and coaching, that increases access to justice, and the complaining attorneys must accept this new reality" (1207). Critics of legal ghostwriting, though, believe that the mystery and uncer-

tainty it creates, the inability to locate power and responsibility in the written representations, make the practice corrosive to judicial processes (Weeman). Specifically, ghostwriting is seen to disturb the attorney-judge relationship, which is made manifest through normative practices of reading and writing.

The military is another site of controversy over ghostwriting, especially the ghostwriting of personnel evaluations, which is reportedly on the rise. Marine Lt. Col. Thomas C. Gillespie is one critic of this practice, by which reviewing officers depend on lower-ranking officers to prepare fitness reports on individual Marines under their command. The reviewing officers then submit the reports under their own names. Some see this practice as a benign and practical solution to the proliferation of paperwork and argue that lower-ranked officers are better positioned to write the evaluations anyway because they have a closer, daily relationship with the rank and file. But Gillespie regards such ghostwriting as a serious disruption in the chain of command and a dereliction of duty on the part of supervisory officers. To Gillespie, the reviewing officer’s signature implies that an independent review has occurred when in fact it has not, creating not only a misrepresentation but also a breach in the hierarchy. Through ghostwriting, the words of the lower-ranking officer leapfrog over the supervisor and go straight to another level of command, where they are treated as authoritative. Gillespie cautions reviewing officers to “[w]rite only what you yourself know from personal experience or objective record” (30). He calls on reviewing officers to use writing to become more involved in direct observation and evaluation of those in their charge and thereby reassert their genuine authority. Authority requires the act of writing, including the attentiveness, judgment, and reflection involved. Gillespie’s argument is similar to criticisms that have been lodged against judges who are seen to rely too heavily on their clerks to write opinions in court cases (Choi and Gulati; Dursht; Lerman). There is something unseemly, critics say, about passing judgment on someone else without undertaking the mental wrestling entailed in writing the opinion yourself. Writing does something to those who write: earning them, through the work of it, the authority of their verdicts and thereby the authority of their positions.

A third controversy—the most complex and perhaps the most flagrant one— involves scientific ghostwriting sponsored by pharmaceutical companies. In this case, pharmaceutical companies conduct research on their own products and, when the outcomes are favorable, hire a medical education firm to write a scholarly article based on the company’s experimental data. Once the article is drafted, the pharmaceutical company locates a prominent medical professor willing to “guest author” the article for purposes of submitting it to a research journal for publication. Pharmaceutical companies defend the practice as a way of getting important clinical information out to the medical community in a timely fashion. Medical education firms defend the practice so long as their writers get full access to all the data and use

rigorous scientific overview. In their view, a rigorous and principled writing process makes the article worthy of publication on its own merits, regardless of the name that ultimately goes on it. Needless to say, however, this practice has met with outrage from journal editors, scientists, and other academics, as well as various professional organizations and the general public (Fugh-Berman; Jacobs; Laine and Mulrow; Tierney and Gerrity). Academics tend to object because guest authors are credited with publications without putting in substantive effort, creating unfairness in the academic reward system. Journal editors object because the articles cannot on their faces be differentiated from those that are written with more independence. Because the editors cannot pass on what they see as critical knowledge about the origins of the work, they compromise their relationship with reviewers and readers. On their part, readers just feel duped. Ghostwriting deprives them of the usual means of bringing critical interpretation to data and findings. In this situation, when the prestige of writing is borrowed and lent, the integrity of everybody's literacy is threatened. What may be especially goading is the way the commercial drug company commandeers the most prized tools of the academic trade (writing and publishing articles) to insert its interests into the ostensibly impartial institution of science, and does so by stealthy exploitation of the academy's literacy habits and values, including trust in the independence of academic writing.

Professional associations of journal editors, medical writers, and scientists have published codes of ethics in an effort to curtail this practice, mostly by insisting on disclosure and transparency among all parties involved. As with the cases of military commanders and judges, reformers call on guest authors to become more involved in the work of writing as a means of restoring integrity to the process. The Editorial Policy Board of the World Association of Medical Editors, chaired by Robert J. Fletcher of the Harvard Medical School, finds a close association between professionalism and the *work* of writing:

The integrity of the published record of scientific research depends not only on the validity of the science but also on honesty in authorship. Editors and readers need to be confident that authors have undertaken the work described and have ensured that the manuscript accurately reflects their work, irrespective of whether they took the lead in writing or sought assistance from a medical writer. (World 549)

Thus we can see through controversies over ghostwriting how deeply literacy saturates many of our major institutions not merely in their central practices but also as a means by which institutions maintain a sense of themselves. Where professional or institutional breaches are perceived to occur, they often implicate authoring and composing practices and/or take advantage of members' usual (trusting) habits of reading and writing. Controversial ghostwriting practices especially seem to disturb normative reading and writing practices that maintain hierarchy or social de-

marcations or else condition systems of access and reward. Litigants who appear as if they can write like attorneys, low-level officers whose words carry the weight of their superiors, or commercial writers who can write like professors all can pose threats, at least in some eyes, to the ways that order or justice or privilege is maintained. The remedies to these problems lie either in redistribution of the work of writing back toward the purported author or else full transparency in disclosing who does what in the composing process. However, despite efforts like codes of ethics developed by medical editors, many observers remain doubtful that the practice of ghostwriting—including the obfuscation of authorship that lies at the heart of its success—can really be curtailed. Writing is just too valuable and scarcities of time and skill too great to stem the tide.

CONCLUSION: WHAT’S PRESIDING?

Those of us who teach and study writing these days cannot but be aware of how current economic, social, and technological changes are affecting the meanings and values that surround literacy and its practices. This influence, in my view, begins with the deep appropriation of literacy and particularly writing into the processes and products of the so-called Information Age. Writing as a mass practice thoroughly participates now in the trading of things and ideas and the competition for attention to things and ideas. While always connected to commercial life, the powers of writing have never been more valuable to more people in so many places, in so many ways, and at so many levels of public and private enterprise. Ideas of authorship have also been affected in recent years by new appreciations for the workings of discourse, collaboration, and intertextuality. Also, the Internet seems to be favoring a less original form of writing: creation by citation, sampling, cutting and pasting, the blurring of the roles of writers and readers. And in the arena of artistic creation, courts seem eager to recognize the authorial rights of corporations and copyright holders. The idea of the individual author as originator of ideas and expression has been most buffeted, indeed, over the last several decades. Yet for now its cultural power, legal standing, and psychological appeal are nearly enough intact that its value can continue to be exploited by agents of change.

The proliferation of ghostwriting, its growing presence in publishing, in politics, in public relations, in professional services, and in the routine maintenance of complex organizations, speaks directly to this rising value of writing in general. But as I hope I have demonstrated, ghostwriting also is a unique ground upon which current transformations in literacy may be particularly apprehensible. As writing is separated from authorship, and embedded in processes of production and transaction, its political and commercial value—not to mention its ethical integrity in the eyes of many—remains tied to interpretive habits that continue to link writing and

authorship. How these competing sets of values will ultimately resolve themselves is yet to be seen. But the fact that ghostwriting is a matter of vigorous debate right now in law, medicine, and even textbook publishing (Schemo) indicates that something is afoot and tells of the sense of violation and disruption that changes in literacy can engender. Especially intriguing is the extent to which so many institutions depend on the idea of the author as originator in order to manage power. In many contexts, authority rests precariously in the act of writing itself, which justifies the right to pass judgment, to make a decision, to claim entitlement. The high status of old-fashioned writing legitimates power, largely through its taxing effort, its call on a person's time, attention, judgment, and skill, and its capacity to strengthen and improve those who take it up. As writing changes and its status is destabilized, there remains a question: What will happen to this legitimacy of power?

Meanwhile, the workaday ghostwriter will continue to negotiate these transformations one task at a time, as they appear as practical challenges in the lending and borrowing of power and perspective that ghostwriting always entails. In any event, at the experiential level, ghostwriting will remain a most coercive literacy practice, because it can force alignment with ways of thinking that are not one's own. It also can be a most subversive literacy practice—because it can redistribute the goods of literacy across the usual barriers of inequality. The testimonies of ghostwriters also serve to remind us that no matter what happens, the fruits of writing, its satisfactions and contributions to personal development, will be hard to separate from those who engage in it, however credit-less they may be. Above all, ghostwriting and its controversies bring our attention to how deeply literacy as a mass phenomenon infiltrates the modern institutions that have grown up with literacy, how unconsciously these institutions depend on members to invoke normative habits of reading and writing to define institutional relationships and make things run smoothly. This essay has only scratched the surface of that dependency, but I hope it has shown how deeply our current shifts in literacy could reach.

NOTES

1. It is beyond the scope of this essay to address the rich histories of authorship and copyright laws in print, including the extensive scholarship that surrounds them. Many of the protections of authorship in U.S. copyright law are based not in the expressive rights of individuals but rather in the interests of the public to have access to new ideas. Copyright is designed to create economic incentive for writers to benefit readers. For useful histories of this and other issues, see Durham; Howard; Saunders; Sherman and Strowel; Woodmansee.

2. Of the forty people I talked with, fourteen ghostwrote—twelve of them as part of the writing they did at work overall, one in a moonlighting service, and one as a volunteer. Represented here are a broker in a family-owned mortgage company; a communications director for a biotechnology firm; a regional marketer for a health maintenance organization; two speechwriters in large state agencies; an aide to an elected official; a public information officer; a communications specialist; a translator; a law

clerk; a technical writer; and three freelance writers. They were interviewed between 2004 and 2006, usually at their places of work, sometimes at my place of work, and in one case over the telephone. Interviews averaged one to two hours. The most commonly ghostwritten genre was the letter, but collectively this group also ghostwrote newsletter columns and feature stories, speeches, e-mail messages, judicial rulings, academic articles, directions, and reports. Using principles of grounded theory (Charmaz; Strauss and Corbin), I coded the interviews for reports of borrowing/lending and scarcity/value as well as the circumstances (who, what, where, when, how, why) of those reported events.

3. The one exception was the broker in a family-run mortgage company, who wrote for her relatives.

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