Introducing writing (in) the city

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Introducing writing (in) the city

> *There are ten million stories in the Naked City.*
>
> *But no one can remember which one is theirs.*
>
> – Laurie Anderson, *United States*

Preamble

The artist Thomas Demand makes photographs of paper and cardboard models of home interiors and exteriors, buildings, and other architectural structures, such as living spaces, kitchens, offices, housing estates, embassies, diving boards, and so on. His models are based on well-publicized media photographs. Once photographed, the models are destroyed. The resulting images appear anonymous, ghostly, and "cold." They contain no people, and no language. The buildings have no signage. The scattered white A4 sheets are blank. The post-it notes have no scribbles. The storage boxes have no labels, and if they do, they are blank.

In 2004, the artist Jonas Dahlberg and Moderna Museet Abroad contributed a project titled *Invisible Cities* to the São Paulo Biennial. With a nod to Italo Calvino, the project draws viewers' attention to some 14,000 cities around the world, populated by roughly 10,000–100,000 people, that are not regional centres, that lack resources, that grapple with issues of "citizenship," that are not on anyone's radar,

that are, simply, "not on the map." The project is intriguing and complex in ways that we cannot do justice to here. What is relevant, however, are the visuals. The book accompanying the installation (Dahlberg, Dahlberg and Holtermann, 2004) includes twelve "Location Studies" of "Invisible Cities," no doubt also featured in the São Paulo exhibition. These are six night-time and six daytime digitally altered photographs of small town and suburban cityscapes. The night-time images depict predominantly 3–4 story residential and industrial-looking buildings, black skies, tarmac roads and pavements, trees, brightly lit street lamps and rows of parked cars. The day-time images depict predominantly 3–4 story residential-looking buildings, blue skies with "good weather" clouds, tarmac roads and pavements, trees, shrubs and lawns. The buildings have neither doors nor windows and carry no signage. The cars have no visible registration plates. There are no road signs or markings of any sort. The *idea* of the invisible city is visually communicated through the absence of people, movement, and language.

This point was made especially clear in the Spring and Summer of 2020 when this special issue was being completed and the world was experiencing the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic. Constant news reports from around the world showed cities under lockdown, devoid of people, road and air traffic, invoking descriptions such as "still," "eerie," "ghostly," or "surreal." The imposition of lockdown in cities erased what Michel de Certeau (1984) might call the embodied demarcation of space (*bornage*) that is actualized in city dwellers' everyday practice (see also below).

According to Philip Fisher (1991), letters and numbers are fundamentally the most powerful symbols of what constitutes human rationality. Writing, then, in all its manifestations—or more generally, *graphic traces* (Van Leeuwen and Johannessen 2018, 2), that is, "enduring marks left in or on a solid surface by continuous

movement" (Ingold 2007, 43)—is one of the most powerful resources for us to define ourselves as human, and it is one of the key mediums for articulating our shared as well as individual identities.

> [T]he letters of the alphabet and the numerals of decimal notation are […] the crucifix, Virgin and Child of modern secular civilization. There are no more fundamental symbols of what we mean by rationality itself than the letters and numbers that are the tools of our literacy, our existence as an economy, and as a scientific civilization. (Fisher, 1991: 58; see also Jaworski and Lou, this issue)

This special issue investigates the powerful and particular role of writing as a resource for "making" the city—its design, image, and day-to-day practices. The notion of *writing* is treated differently across the papers, although, importantly, it is never confined to a narrow—glottic—sense "as the use of graphic marks to represent specific linguistic utterances" (Rogers 2005, 2). This *surrogate* view of writing as a substitute for speech has been challenged by Harris (1996, 2005) in favour of analyzing "the particulars of written communication in specific circumstances" (82). Harris' *integrationist* approach to writing (and all communication) requires all the relevant elements of a sign—whether containing glottic or nonglottic writing, such as mathematical symbols, musical notation, knitted patterns, and so on—to remain in "functional complementarity" (Harris 2005, 89). A traveller "reading" a signpost does not *just* attend to the letter forms but to the metal upright, the horizontal arm and its directionality, the shape, colour and size of the letters, the colour of their background, and so on. In other words, alphabetic and other types of scripts and notations always

form part of *multimodal ensembles* (Kress and van Leeuwen 2001, 111–122)—that is, representational and communicational complexes based on *designs* and involving multiple *modes*, such as "*speech*; *still image*; *moving image*; *writing*; *gesture*; *music*; *3D models*; *action*; *colour*" (Kress 2010, 28; emphasis in the original; also cited in Jaworski 2020, 336).

In the crowded market of scholarly writing (on) the city, the contributors to this special issue tackle several different styles and genres of visual communication as resources for making and imagining the city, its design, organization, and everyday practices. Most papers in the special issue orient to different forms of glottic writing broadly conceived as elements of urban multimodal ensembles, including displayed multilingual poetry, online and offline, (Lee, this issue); a "non-standard," *spoken* Bernese dialect of Swiss German displayed on anti-racist campaign posters (Thurlow, this issue); handwritten commercial signs and their stylizations (Li and Zhu, this issue); and text on clothes and accessories (Jaworski and Lou, this issue). Järlehed (this issue) opens the special issue with the exploration of *emblematic* writing in city logos that include initial letters of their names, harking back to the ancient hieroglyphic, allegorical and heraldic traditions, and the logoizing practices of contemporary marketers. The three remaining papers radically extend the notion of writing to include such modalities as architecture (Aiello 2021, this issue); architectural discourses and multimedia performances *about* (imagined) cities (Pérez-Milans, this issue); and sociolinguistic research as an example of visions of the city as the locus of language (Karlander, this issue).[1]

With these literal and metaphorical conceptualizations of writing, we aim to capture some of the multimodal complexity of signifying practices in the city, and the resulting inscription of cities in space and in people's imaginations. In this sense, the

way we consider writing echoes de Certeau's (1984, 196) idea of writing as "a possibility of composing a space in conformity with one's will," or Cresswell's (2019, 11) of writing as a kind of building, of making place (see below).

Writing (in) the city

Cities are diverse sites of intense semiotic production. In this special issue, we focus on the multimodality, materiality and multilinguality of writing as a mediational means of interpersonal and intergroup relationships, hierarchies, and imaginaries (Scollon and Scollon 2004), and as a repository of the city's memory or biography. Written predominantly from the complementary perspectives of sociolinguistics, social semiotics, critical discourse studies, and applied linguistics, the papers gathered here continue the tradition of writing on "everyday life" in and of the city developed throughout the twentieth century in the work of André Breton, Walter Benjamin, Guy Debord, Michel de Certeau, Henri Lefebvre, and many others, continuing this tradition into the twenty-first century (Thrift 2000). However, as Nigel Thrift (2000) argues (see also Karlander), writing the city takes many different guises and is *performative* of the city in its own right. Thrift cites the role of "theater, opera, concert and dance, performance art, multimedia" (406), all contributing to our understanding of the city as "a field of possibility, borne out of chance encounters, new forms of experience based, for example, on new technologies, and on the production of new more open subjectivities…" (401). Cities become accumulations of experiences, possibilities, objects, networks, and relationships, and they are both cited in and inscribed by writing in different registers, modalities, literary genres; artworks; economic transactions; and forms of scholarship (see also Pérez-Milans). Thus, different knowledges of the city are unravelled, revealing "what is permitted and

prohibited, present and absent, surprising and unsurprising" (Thrift 2000, 405–406). These forms of knowledge come to us in a range of embodied and multisensory experiences in the process of people and things exerting influence on one another. Things, then, are not just mere commodities. They occupy cities that

> have become repositories of "objectivity"; they are—increasingly—crowded with objects which—increasingly—"speak back." Objects become more "person"-like, just as persons have become more "object"-like (Gell 1998; Boyne 1998). However, cities are not therefore assuming a "posthuman" character […] (e.g. Virilio 1991), but rather a transhuman one, in which we dwell among badly analysed composites—networks of flesh and machines—and are ourselves badly analysed composites, to paraphrase Deleuze (1994). (Thrift 2000, 405; see also Thurlow, 2016)

We follow the above line of reasoning by extending the idea of writing (in) the city to all forms of symbolic signification, or sign-making, including the built environment (e.g. Eco 2003 [1973]; Rapoport 1982; Aiello). Sociologists, human geographers and cultural critics have long drawn our attention to the role of symbolic production, alongside accumulation of capital, as one of the main drivers of urban (re)development in late modernity. The ever-increasing consumption of cultural commodities that move "between 'economic' and 'cultural' sectors" (Zukin 1990, 48) has saturated urban centres with the spectacles of signs and symbols. The combination of culture industries with service (corporate, leisure and tourism) and space (real estate) economies blends revitalized, inner-city residential and post-industrial architecture with new apartment and office towers; themed shopping sites providing

entertainment; cafes and "international" restaurants staging displays of the "exotic" and the "authentic"; former retail and industrial spaces giving way to temporary or permanent art galleries and museums; public parks and plazas being saturated with screen and billboard installations, public sculpture, avant-garde performances, and so on and so forth (e.g. Harvey 1989; Zukin 1990, 1991, 1995). Yet, for the most part, it remains the prerogative of sociolinguists, applied linguists and social semioticians to work with the nitty-gritty of spoken and written language, while also putting their analyses in dialogue with the multimodal, multisensory, and embodied aspects of communication. In the last two decades, much work has been published scrutinizing the typographic, orthographic, and other discursive, spatial and material properties of writing as part of cities' diversity, redevelopment, regeneration and gentrification (e.g. Gonçalves 2018; Lou 2016; Järlehed, Lykke Nielsen and Rosendal 2018; Leeman and Modan 2009; Lyons 2019; Papen 2012; Trinch and Snajdr 2020; Vandenbroucke 2018; Zhu, Otsuji and Pennycook 2017).

Cities as/and text

As is often the case, it is necessary to emphasize, albeit briefly, that writing (in) the city (the empire, the kingdom, the state) is not a new phenomenon, nor is its scholarly examination. Textual and multimodal inscriptions in ancient and medieval times have received extensive scholarly treatment from historians, art historians, classicists and linguists (e.g. Blair and Bloom 2017; Eastmond 2015; Coulmas 2009; Squire 2009). For example, Armando Petrucci (1993 [1980]) surveys the history of Italian and European epigraphic writing, which is celebratory in style and publicly displayed, beginning with the cities of the Roman Empire, where the ubiquitous, monumental stone inscriptions in Latin and Greek occupied the apex of the epigraphic writing

hierarchy (Petrucci 1993 [1980]: 3). After a roughly two century (1200–1300s) hiatus

of the Middle Ages,

> [t]he city of the late Renaissance and of the baroque era became once again a
> center of writing…[especially] created by "high," or official, culture. In the
> urban areas, however, the spreading of literacy and the development of intense
> commercial activity soon contributed to the creation of other types of display
> texts, such as shop signs, notices, playbills advertising shows and fairs, and
> satyrical [sic] posters created for carnival time. These were produced by the
> lower social–strata and were therefore destined to contain some form of
> graphic deviance. Made of wood, cardboard, or cloth, they were indeed fragile
> and ephemeral. Unlike the official form of ephemeral inscription created for
> funereal ceremonies or public celebrations, descriptions of which have been
> left by scholars and engravers, hardly any testimony to these cruder forms has
> survived. Enough traces have remained, however, to allow us to identify those
> traits that deviate from the prevailing graphic norm. For example, a poster
> advertising "La Nave" coffee in Venice is based on a baroque design. It has an
> inscription in capital letters mixed with miniscule and other letter forms,
> engraved on drapery, and is very similar to the inscriptions of playbills
> advertising Sicilian puppet shows or to those on the street signs advertising the
> wares of Florentine watermelon vendors. The text is in Italian, of course.
> (Petrucci 1993 [1980], 91–92)

Petrucci continues with a brief discussion of two more types of "deviant"

writing on urban walls that are worthy of note; handwritten and subversive/criminal.

The former "represented the free if somewhat crude expression of semiliterate children and adults who used writing as a game, as a means on unleashing anger, and as a form of entertainment and creative self-expression." The latter, largely preserved in the legal archives of Rome, include

> eye-opening examples of defamatory posters that were pasted in the dead of night in the doors of houses, taverns, churches, or other buildings, or on street corners and piazzas in order to deride, insult, or threaten a rival in love, a dishonest shopkeeper, an arrogant nobleman, a corrupt priest, a whore, and so forth. Usually written in uncertain majuscules or in an assorted mix of majuscules and minuscules, they are frequently accompanied by obscene or bizarre drawings. (Petrucci 1993 [1980], 92)

Despite Petrucci's evaluative and somewhat aloof stance, all of these examples resonate with many of the papers in this collection, which focus on the semiotic choices and processes attesting to the social stratification and ideological struggles in the areas where the signs are displayed: selection of linguistic codes ("Italian, of course." as opposed to the hegemony of Latin; Tong King Lee; Crispin Thurlow); styling ("baroque," suggesting an aspirational stance; Järlehed; Lee; Thurlow; Li and Zhu); intertextual relations ("playbills advertising Sicilian puppet shows," "signs…of Florentine watermelon vendors," suggesting a degree of enregisterment of commercial signage; Järlehed; Lee; Thurlow; Aiello; Li and Zhu; Pérez-Milans); materiality ("engraved on drapery" *vs*. "handwritten/crude," indicative of differential valuation of linguistic resources and their technologies; Järlehed; Jaworski and Lou; Li and Zhu; Aiello); spatial and temporal emplacement ("on doors," "in the dead of

night;" Li and Zhu; Jaworski and a Lou; Giorgia Aiello); unclear participation frameworks ("to deride, insult, or threaten;" Jaworski and Lou; Li and Zhu); the deployment various orthographic, typographic and multimodal resources ("uncertain majuscules," "assorted mix of majuscules and minuscules," "accompanied by obscene or bizarre drawings;" Järlehed; Thurlow; Li and Zhu; Jaworski and Lou).

Urban planning is always closely tied up with language planning. The presence, spread, or disappearance of languages and varieties displayed or spoken in different areas of cities is contingent on the ecological interventions of urban planners, authorities, economic shifts, and population movements (Mac Giolla Chríost 2007; Pred 1990; Lee; Thurlow; Pérez-Milans). Angel Rama's (1996 [1984]) history of Spanish and Portuguese colonialism and urbanization in Latin America from the sixteenth century onwards provides a fascinating glimpse into the rise and power of the *letrados*—the "lettered" elite of functionaries and administrators, notaries, educators, and Jesuit-trained clerks staffing colonial and ecclesiastical offices, who received, disseminated and responded to imperial edicts, orders, and directives arriving from the metropolis (see also Järlehed). Missionaries, academics, poets, and other propagandists produced copious sermons, speeches, lectures, essays and poems fostering the "evangelization" and "education" of the local populations by imposing Christianity and Europeanization (see also Lee on multilingual poetry in Singapore and Thurlow on typographic and orthographic choices in Bern as national identity building resources; and Järlehed on "lettered" city logos as "globalizing" resources). As sites of colonial power, cities were imagined and planned to ensure that their spatial order, epitomised in the geometric design of the checkerboard grid, reproduced the desired, hierarchical, imperial social order. But the *letrados* were not just docile conduits of imperial and, subsequently, state power. On the contrary, they were

"intellectual *producers*" (Rama 1996 [1984], 22), who rather than merely transmit the ideological programme of the empire, elaborated and refined it, legitimating and intensifying the power of the colonial, ecclesiastical and state institutions, and, in the process, of their own institutional irreplaceability.

> Their services in the manipulation of symbolic languages were indispensable, and therefore the functionaries of the lettered city could assert their own preferences in their work without fearing the loss of their positions. Servants of power, in one sense, the letrados became masters of power, in another. (Rama, 1996 [1984], 22)

Several papers in this special issue demonstrate how contemporary, elite intellectual producers, such as architects (Aiello; Pérez-Milan), graphic designers (Thurlow), writers and poets (King Lee), and sociolinguists (Karlander), continue to create copious discourses establishing expert regimes of knowledge about cities. One can observe here a blurring of genres between professional registers and practices, academic writing, literature and performance art. There is a long tradition of utopian, revolutionary, and experimental writing exploiting these and other genres—paintings, graphics, films, maps, models, plans and manifestos—among twentieth century avant-garde architects, artists and activists, such as the Bauhaus (Barbican Centre 2012), the Situationist International (Pinder, 2005), and Archigram (Sadler 2005; see also Markus and Cameron 2002, Chapter 2).

Then, just as in Petrucci's Rome, where, after the loosening of religion's grip on social and political life in the Middle Ages, buildings became sites of public

display of text in the Renaissance era, in the seventeenth century and later on, Latin American cities witnessed a rise in spectacular displays of text and architecture.

> Baroque discourse bloomed with a profusion of emblems, hieroglyphs, apologues, and ciphers, all commonly incorporated in theatrical displays along with painting, sculpture, music, dance, and decorative colors. Letters provided the guiding thread that, according to Goethe, could imbue a potentially chaotic diversity with coherent meaning. (Rama, 1996 [1984], 24)

Johanna Drucker (2010, 146–146) comments that Petrucci's and Rama's classic studies "demonstrate that signage in urban spaces expresses models and conceptions that are themselves part of a history of attitudes towards language and signification, power, and cultural identity, as well as space." In her own analysis, Drucker invokes the idea of *enunciative activity* or *linguistic enunciation* with regard to signs and signage that *write* or *make* different urban spaces—or "Species of *Espaces*"—that are fashioned according to different cultural models of lived organization and imagined potential, historical development, power relations, and symbolic values.

Emplaced and displayed linguistic and other semiotic resources are central to our perception of space, especially to creating "a sense of place" in urban environments (e.g. Jaworski and Thurlow 2010; Johnstone 2004; Pennycook 2010). Governmental, commercial, cultural, tourist, religious, public and private signage, inscriptions, static and mobile captions, labels, writing on LED scrolls and screens, social actors' embodied interactions in and with space, all create "sites of engagement" (Scollon 2001; Jones 2005) where our day-to-day business is conducted.

These sites of engagement are stages for performances of identities, signalling which places we belong to, or not, as well as creating social distinctions and hierarchies, or power relations. The speaking and writing of social actors de-anonymizes urban spaces, making them more or less familiar, more or less inclusive, more or less accessible.

Entangled in issues of class, conquest, politics and power (see above), literacy is intimately bound up with urbanity (Gregory and Williams 2002). Today, many think of it predominantly in terms of digital communication. Our online activities are closely tied to and embedded in our day-to-day offline existence (e.g. Barton and Lee 2013; Lee 2017). The emergence and spread of writing on the internet has had an impact on our offline writing practices, such as signage and branding practices in the cityscape (Lee 2015), the teaching and learning of foreign languages (e.g. Hafner 2014; Li and Ho 2018), and representations of creative writing (Tay 2012). In addition, the affordances of digital media allow individuals to "write" using innovative, multimodal resources, expressing novel identities and connecting with others in new ways (Jones and Hafner 2012). New communities are epitomized and coalesce around online writing, such as hashtags, which act as a metadata device and a discourse marker signalling a social interest or activist group (e.g. Zappavigna 2015). However, it is equally important to continue engaging and tracing "old," analogue technologies of writing, such as handwriting, to understand how cities are imagined and made into "mosaics of polarized geographies of wealth, social status, health, ethnicity and gender" (Mac Giolla Chríost 2007: 10; Li and Zhu). In recent years, as noted by Järlehed and Pérez-Milans, among others, a growing interest in the political economy of language has led to the exploration of the links between the *value* of different styles and genres of writing as well as other semiotic resources (e.g.

architecture, Aiello) in creating and reinforcing boundaries across economically stratified areas, and hence patterns of inclusion and exclusion in the access to and consumption of goods and resources. (e.g. Jaworski 2019; Jaworski and Yeung 2010; Stroud and Mpendukana 2009; Trinch and Snajdr 2020; Vandenbroucke 2016).

As Karlander reminds us, sociolinguistics—the study of social contexts and consequences of language use—is a thoroughly urban enterprise; in writing about language, we typically write about cities. As we reflect on how language is conceptualized in and by the city (dwellers), Karlander invites us to self-reflect on our own conceptualizations of language that emerge from our descriptions. He invokes Cresswell (2019, 11), a geographer, who explains the meaning of the word *geography*—"earth writing"—and adds: "yet relatively little attention has been paid to the 'writing' part," even though, Cresswell argues, to write about a place is to *make* it (see also Karlander). Cresswell describes his own strategy of writing as *topopoetics*, or "place-making" (ibid.).

Karlander examines three ways in which sociolinguists have conceptualized the city as part of their epistemological perspectives: *system*, *image* and *choir*. We can find other overlapping textual analogies and metaphors that have been drawn upon in sociolinguistic and other studies of cities and spatialization more broadly, such as *narrative*, *list*, *manifesto*, *discourse*, and *palimpsest*.

For example, Ruth Finnegan's (1998) study of the narratives of the residents of the English town Milton Keynes conceives of the city as a *story*, both in the sense of the ordering by which people live their lives (Mitchell 1981), and the academic urban theories that "make up an influential set of theories about the city" (Finnegan 1998, 14; also Entrikin 1991, Chapter 7). Likewise, Michel de Certeau's (1984) famous study of human behaviour in the city, most notably *walking*, was in part

informed by sociolinguistic work on narrative (Linde and Labov 1975). In de Certeau's words, his consideration of *narrative actions* allows him to "specify a few elementary forms of practices organizing space: the bipolar distinction between 'map' and 'itinerary,' the procedures of delineation or 'marking boundaries' (*bornage*) and 'enunciative focalizations' (that is, the indication of the body within discourse)" (de Certeau 1984, 116; Lee).

The narrative as a metaphor of urban life has obviously been exploited in the arts, as is clear from this Introduction's epigram by Laurie Anderson, which is a paraphrase of a line that was heard at the end of each episode of the television police drama *Naked City* set in New York City (1958–1968): "There are eight million stories in the naked city. This has been one of them." The TV show was based on the eponymous film noir directed in 1948 by Jules Dassin. The film's title and visual style were in turn inspired by the 1945 book *Naked City* by photographer Arthur H. Fellig (aka Weegee), whose photographs depicted "violent death and the hardships of the very poor in New York City" (Philips 210, 22). Such are the intertextualities and multimodal mythologies being written of cities and their residents.

Of the many genres of topopoetics discussed by Cresswell (2019) in his history of Chicago's Maxwell Street and its environment, including the Maxwell Street Market, (*description*, *parataxis*, *montage*, *reporting*, *assemblage*, *photography*, and so on), we mention here just one—*lists*. Cresswell draws our attention to Georges Perec's (1977) experimental autobiography, *Species of Spaces*, constructed around the differently scaled places from the writer's own experience (see also Drucker 2010): *the bed*, *the bedroom*, *the apartment*, *the apartment building*, *the street*, *the neighbourhood*, *the town*, *the countryside*, *the country*, *Europe*, *Old Continent*, *New Continent*, *the World*, *Space*. All of these spaces fall on a continuum between the

polar opposites of *private* and *public* (Lefebvre and Régulier 1996 [1985] 236).

Perec's description of each one takes the form of a more or less elaborate list, which

may appear to be "dull and mundane" at first, until its intensity "will eventually

provide a spark—a moment where we are teleported to a different place and the

extraordinary emerges" (Cresswell 2019, 4–5). Long lists convey "a poetry of

abundance," especially when artfully arranged with skilful use of such poetic tropes

as alliteration or vivid juxtaposition (ibid., 30). For some poetry of abundance in this

special issue, see Järlehed's Figure 1 and the Appendix; Li and Zhu's Figures 22 and

23. These and other lists, presented in the papers as our data sets, or as is the case with

Li and Zhu's examples as lists on restaurant menus, demonstrate urban rhythmic

structures "determined by the forms of alliances which human groups give to

themselves (Lefebvre and Régulier, 1996 [1985], 234). Alongside cities' polyphonic

textures (Jaworski and Lou; Karlander), these rhythmic structures, including rituals,

staged events, or happenings (Aiello; Lee; Pérez-Milans; Thurlow), create fleeting or

enduring urban convivialities, allegiances, and shared cultural models of the city.

Rem Koolhaas' *Delirious New York* celebrates the city's architecture as a

"*retroactive manifesto* for Manhattan" (Koolhaas 1994 [1978], 9, original emphasis).

Setha Low (2019) presents her recent edited collection of urban anthropology studies

as an *activist manifesto* (our term) "to reach a wider set of publics and find our voices

by effectively communicating and acting upon the public significance of our findings"

(Low, 2019, 4). Gabrielle Modan (2019) comments on the distinction between *big D*

and *little d discourse* (Gee 1990) as critical lenses for the study of language in the

city: the former orienting to broader discursive formations organizing social life as

sets of ideologies in the sense of Michel Foucault (e.g. 1972), while the latter

orienting to fine grained analyses of linguistic and multimodal features of language in

and about the city. In effect, most critical sociolinguistic work combines both approaches to discourse. Finally, yet again citing de Certeau, cities are *palimpsests*, shaped by "revolutions of history, economic mutations, [and] demographic mixtures…[a] piling up of heterogeneous places," detectable in fragments of language, customs, rites and spatial practices, heterogeneous yet complementary and "mutually interacting" (de Certeau, 1984, 201–202; Drucker 2010; Shep 2015).

New normalities in the city?

As the special issue goes into production, many cities across the world are beginning to come out of the COVID pandemic. But the cityscape is very different from what it was a year ago. Spaces are being rearranged to maintain social distancing; signs about face covering, hand sanitization and social distancing are everywhere; people are avoiding each other on the street and in communal places. We see very few tourists taking pictures of the familiar sights. And many people have said that they buy clothes, online, that suit virtual meetings rather than face-to-face encounters. Nobody can be sure how long these new normalities will last (Coupland in press/2020). What is certain is that the city is being rewritten by the pandemic and the human relations that it has reconfigured. We hope that the articles in this special issue provide a new impetus for more studies of how cities across the world are written and rewritten and demonstrate what linguists and semioticians can contribute to the understanding of the making of cities.

Note

1. To avoid undue repetition of "this issue," subsequent references with no year of publication signify papers in this special issue—*Social Semiotics* 2021, 31 (1).

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