Texts

—Mavis Reimer

The change of the name of this journal from *Canadian Children's Literature/Littérature canadienne pour la jeunesse* to *Jeunesse: Young People, Texts, Cultures* in 2009 was the subject of many hours of discussion by the editorial and advisory boards. Among the questions we debated were the gains and losses in dropping the national descriptor of the journal, the best way to indicate that we intended to continue to publish in two languages, the implications of substituting the term "young people" for "children," and the grammatical relation implied by the order and punctuation of the three terms of our subtitle. The choice to replace "literature/littérature" with "texts," however, occasioned little controversy: it seemed obvious to us that *texts* was a more open and flexible category, one which formally signals our intention to work within a cultural-studies framework and our welcome of the submission of essays on a wide range of literary, media, and cultural objects and forms. But, if the obvious is typically a rich site for investigation, as ideological critics have demonstrated, then it seems useful to unpack the term to which we so readily agreed.[1]

The shift in literary studies from the common usage of *literature* to the common usage of *texts* to describe the object of study is registered in the different choices made by Raymond Williams in *Keywords* (1976) and by Tony Bennett, Lawrence Grossberg, and Meaghan Morris in *New Keywords* (2005): *literature* appears as a main entry and there is no entry for *text* in the 1976 "vocabulary of culture and society," while the opposite is true of the 2005 reference work. Williams explains in his 1976 entry that the word *literature* came into English "in the sense of polite learning through reading" in the fourteenth century (184). Since the eighteenth century, however, the history of the word has involved "a steady distinction and separation" of "well-written books of an *imaginative* or *creative* kind" from "other kinds of writing—philosophy,

essays, history, and so on—which may or may not possess literary merit or be of literary interest," as well as from those poems and plays and novels that "are not 'substantial' or 'important' enough to be called works of literature" (186). "Significantly in recent years," he notes in a concluding paragraph, *literature* and the *literary* have been "increasingly challenged, on what is conventionally their own ground, by concepts of *writing* and *communication* which seek to recover the most active and general senses which the extreme specialization had seemed to exclude" (187).

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Terry Threadgold's entry for *text* in *New Keywords* makes it clear that the challenge glimpsed by Williams was, indeed, consequential and far-reaching: not only are "all genres of writing" now referred to as texts "for purposes of analysis" in literary studies, but also "[a]ll of these enterprises are seen as aspects of a general textuality and as forms of textual practice," a category which also includes multimedia cultural texts "in which language is only one dimension" (346). The expanded notion of text, defined by Threadgold as "a pan-disciplinary concept that encompasse[s] any cultural object of investigation" (346), describes the understanding of *texts* that informs the title of this journal and that is generally used in contemporary international cultural studies. In his 2008 textbook *Cultural Studies*, Chris Barker observes that "it is an axiom of cultural studies that a text is anything that generates meaning through signifying practices" (490).

Barker's gloss on *text* assumes the framework of semiotics, especially as developed by Roland Barthes in *Mythologies* (1957). In one of the essays in that collection, Barthes analyzes the court appearance of a farmer who was charged with and convicted of murder, a case in which police, prosecutor, judge, and journalists all concurred in borrowing elements of classical rhetoric and literary

characterizations to describe the man, the event, and the scene of the trial itself. "Literature has just condemned a man to the guillotine" ("Dominici" 43), Barthes concludes, with *literature* here, as Simon During observes, meaning not just "the literary canon but the conventional system of writing and representation in which the canon remains uncontested" (42), what Barthes himself calls the "intermediate myth" of "the transparence and universality of language" ("Dominici" 44).

It is in this context that Barthes's later claims about the effect of changing the language of literary study might be read. In "From Work to Text" (1971), he suggests that the text (which he renders as "the Text") is a new conceptual object that stands "against the traditional notion of the *work*" (156). Among other things, Barthes proposes, the text is "always *paradoxical*" or subversive of "old classifications" (158, 157); "practises the infinite deferment of the signified" in "a serial movement of disconnections, overlappings, variations" (158); depends on "its weave of signifiers" (159) and its "*already read*" citations (160) for its plurality of meaning; breaks with metaphors of filiation, being better understood as a network than as an organism (161); and is bound to "a pleasure without separation" or jouissance (164). In a summary of his essay, Barbara Johnson concludes that Barthes considers the text to be "an open, infinite process that is both meaning-generating and meaning-subverting" (40). If the text is a process, then the relation of reader to literary object also needs to be rethought: rather than consuming a work, the reader is invited to collaborate in producing a text. "The Text," Barthes postulates, "decants the work . . . and gathers it up as play, activity, production, practice" (162). While Barthes's project in this essay is to propose a new language for literary study, he begins with the observation of the recent "encounter" with the object of the text of such other disciplines as linguistics, anthropology, and psychoanalysis (155), an encounter characterized by anthropologist Clifford Geertz, writing at the same time as Barthes, as "the systematic study of meaningful forms" across the humanities and the social sciences (x). In other words, the discourse on "the Text," with its "relativization of the relations of writer, reader and observer (critic)," is a consequence of the "sliding" of texts through many forms of cultural inquiry (156).

Accounts of Barthes's place in the history of critical and cultural theory almost invariably locate him in relation to Jacques Derrida and the larger project of deconstructing realist epistemology and ontology through an investigation carried out under the name of *écriture* or writing. But it was rereading Barthes's essay specifically that reminded me of some of the implications of using *texts* in the title of this journal. To assume something can mean both to take a postulate for granted as the basis of an argument and to take responsibility for that position (*OED*). In

both of these senses, we assumed in our editorial conversations, first, that the term *texts* points to what Manina Jones calls "a breakdown of the boundaries between literature and other verbal and non-verbal signifying practices" (641). Second, and perhaps more important, the vocabulary of *texts* proposes the disruption of the conventional relations of reader and writer.

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The field of young people's texts is marked by the fact of being identified—to use a model from communication studies—by the putative receivers rather than the senders of the message: children's literature, YA fiction, and children's culture, for example, are phrases that name texts and activities that seek young people as readers, players, or consumers. But this classification often has been accompanied by the assumption that these texts function, or should function, as clear messages, in the sense of moral imperatives, about behaviours, attitudes, and understandings of the world and one's place in it, so that, ironically, the receiver is effectively effaced. To imagine a young reader who plays with, collaborates in producing, or struggles with texts is to bring the receiver into view. This invites critics, on the one hand, to pay more attention to the plural, heterogeneous, and open meanings of texts, and, on the other hand, to study the figure constructed as the imagined reader of them. If "the child" is understood as a subject position to which young people are regularly assigned—if, that is, "the child" is conceptually separated from young people—then it becomes possible to imagine young people as senders of messages, or as authors of texts, as well as receivers and readers. Indeed, part of the mandate of this journal is to publish research on texts produced *by* young people.

The "relativization of the relations of writer, reader, and critic" ("From Work" 156) that Barthes posits as a condition of developing a

"theory of the Text" (164) also extends to the position of critic. The question of how the field of young people's texts might be reframed if young people occupied the positions of writer, reader, and critic simultaneously or interchangeably is one that has not been much addressed in theoretical work in literary studies. But this composite figure is emerging in the practices of Internet fan-fiction communities, where readers are always writers and critics, and often also theorists of writing. Even before the mainstreaming of the Internet and the fannish practices this widespread access sponsored, Henry Jenkins observed that "[o]rganized fandom is, perhaps first and foremost, an institution of theory and criticism" (86). For young writers of fan fiction, Barthes's observations that "the Text . . . is bound to *jouissance*" in that it is "that space where no language has a hold over any other" and that "the discourse on the Text should itself be nothing other than text, research, textual activity" (164) might well appear to be commonplaces.

A third implication of using the language of *texts* is embedded in the proposition that a text be understood as a "weave of signifiers" or "tissue" of meanings that exceed it (159). In using this language, we intend to signal our interest in publishing essays that detail the ways in which texts manifest and repress narrative, cultural, and social codes; that consider groupings of texts and read texts as intertexts; and that locate the contexts and recontextualizations of texts. Among the essays we seek are studies of texts *about* young people, as well as studies of texts *for* and *by* young people, and studies in which these texts are read together. The discontinuities and overlaps between texts displaying "the child" to adults, staging "the child" for young people, and negotiating the space of "the child" seem likely to be productive grounds for future research.

Finally, Barthes's remark that texts resist classifications—that "the Text does not stop at (good) Literature; it cannot be contained in a hierarchy, even in a simple division of genres" (157)—proposes that the language of *texts* is not aligned with the practice of sorting literary works into the substantial and the unsubstantial, the important and the unimportant, a practice Raymond Williams identified as a principal interest of literary study in 1976. Under this system, much of children's literature has been dismissed as "sub-literary," a category, Williams explains, that was used to describe "works which may be fiction but which are not *imaginative* or *creative*, which are therefore devoid of aesthetic interest, and which are not art" (186). When *CCL/LCJ* was first published in 1975, the linkage of *literature* and *children's* in its title was a refusal to concede that this dismissive judgment was a sufficient account of the field. In 2009, the shift in our title indicates that we take texts about, for, and by young people—from award-winning fiction to toy packaging to TV advertising to blogs—to be equally meaningful objects of analysis.

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At the same time as I affirm the motive of editors past and present in choosing the language of *texts* to signal that we welcome discussions of a wide range of literary, media, and cultural objects and forms, I am conscious of the way in which my discussion repeatedly slips into talk about written texts. No doubt this is in part a consequence of my particular training and scholarly interests, and in part a response to the essays on which I've been focusing. But it is useful to be reminded that the enthusiasm of literary scholars for the new understanding of *text* made possible by its "slide" through other forms of cultural inquiry may not be shared by scholars from other disciplines. In sketching recent changes in the language of *literature* at the end of his 1976 essay, Williams observes that "*literary* has been a term of disparagement in discussion of certain other arts, notably painting and music," an indication that the work is "dependent on 'external' meanings of a 'literary' kind" (187). Anthropologist Mark Schneider, critiquing the work of Clifford Geertz, protests that "to call upon textual metaphors" in dealing with "webs of significance" that are not linguistic is to displace the mode of analysis to the object analyzed: "the ethno-interpretations themselves are necessarily 'language,' but the same cannot be said of the phenomena they interpret" (812). Barthes, too, cautions that "[i]nterdisciplinarity is not the calm of an easy security," but rather the symptom of an "unease in classification" ("From Work" 155).

The easy slippage from *texts* to written texts also occurs in part because other meanings of the word continue to circulate beneath and beside the specialized usage of cultural studies: the word itself is "held" in the "intertextual," in Barthes's sense ("From Work" 160). The first definition of *text* listed in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is "the wording of anything written or printed; the structure formed by

the words in their order; the very words, phrases, and sentences as written." This meaning has been extended and complicated in the discourses and practices of editors, translators, and other scholars of textual study, whose choices about meanings, coherence, and presentation of stretches of language in their preparation of texts often precede the possibility of the interpretation of those texts. My reflection on "From Work to Text," for example, relies on Stephen Heath's selection and translation of Barthes's essays. Gayatri Spivak has noted in the Translator's Preface to *Of Grammatology* that translation can be understood as "a version of the intertextuality that comes to bear also within the 'same' language" (lxxxvii); it is also the case, however, that scholars of textual studies have paid more attention to the materiality of texts than have scholars of critical theory. Katherine Hayles, for example, claims that current notions of textuality "are shot through with assumptions specific to print, although they have not been generally recognized as such" (263). For Hayles, the advent of electronic textuality presents scholars "with an unparalleled opportunity to re-formulate fundamental ideas about texts" (263), a reformulation that must involve a greater appreciation of the propositions "that media and materiality . . . matter" (287).

None of the essays in this issue of *Jeunesse* focus on digital texts, but, taken together, they reveal many of the complexities of the vocabulary of *texts*. Aparna Gollapudi demonstrates how the combinatory verbal-visual text, what she calls the iconotext, of Peter Sís's picture book *Tibet: Through the Red Box* works within both semiotic and symbolic systems of signification to unsettle the possibility of secure meanings. In her analysis of the effect of the iconotext, Gollapudi uses the framework of Julia Kristeva's theories of the self as an intertextual site. Discussing the Pixar film *Wall-E*, Ann Howey notes the eponymous character's pleasure in playing with, and attempting to create meaning from, the objects and texts he finds among the heaps of garbage left behind by humans when they abandoned the planet; but also explores the contradictory meanings and effects of such play in the contemporary contexts of consumer society and environmental movements. Among the texts Howey considers in reaching her conclusions are viewer responses posted to the website *Metacritic.com* and the behaviour of audience members in the theatre where she saw the film.

Jean-Nicolas De Surmont, Michelle Abate, and María Sierra Córdoba Serrano in various ways consider the circulation and recontextualization of groups of texts. De Surmont argues that popular songs in nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century Quebec were not transmitted only as oral texts, but also through the publication and distribution in schools of song collections. This mode of transmission was an attempt by schools and teachers to secure control

of the versions and the meanings of the songs. Abate demonstrates that a popular contemporary American book series, Left Behind: The Kids, adopts narrative forms and marketing models established by the American Sunday School Union in the nineteenth century to work toward a similar end, that of the conversion of a wide audience of young people to an evangelical Christian view of history. In the case of the contemporary texts, the effort specifically is to persuade young people to understand current political, cultural, and natural events as signs of a coming apocalypse. In "Flagging the Nation," Córdoba Serrano undertakes a detailed case study of translations of Quebec fiction for young people into both Catalan and Spanish by the Spanish publishing house La Galera. Although fiction for young people in Quebec is grounded in a self-conscious national identity, it travels easily across these international borders. Paying attention both to the linguistic choices of the translators and to the material choices of the publisher—the selection of the texts to be translated, the design of covers, and the inclusion of peritextual material in the Catalan editions— Córdoba Serrano shows how Catalan readers are taught to map the situation of Quebec in Canada onto the situation of Catalonia in Spain so the Québécois texts can be read as implicitly supporting Catalan nationalism.

The review essays once again focus on groups of Canadian texts directed to young people, including Rachel Van Deventer's review of French-language picture books and novels by Canadian authors, Carole Scott's overview of picture books produced by the publishing house Simply Read, and the collaborative review of recent YA novels undertaken by Theresa Rogers and her graduate students. Heather Snell's review of several illustrated books of poetry reads these texts beside a theoretical and historical study of the construction of national identity, while Diana Brydon's review of the new Groundwork Guides series of non-fiction books suggests that the implied readers of these texts are situated as global citizens. Reviewing a group of scholarly books in the field of girls' studies, Natalie Coulter remarks on the attempts being made by researchers to include girls as analysts as well as objects in the study of girlhood and girl cultures.

Coulter's review is a reminder that *texts* in the subtitle of the journal is followed by *cultures*. The word stands as an acknowledgement that there may be ways of conceptualizing and discussing meaningful cultural structures and practices that are not contained by the vocabulary of *texts*. It is also a commitment to remain uneasy in our definitions.

Notes

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