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Making Worlds that Make Sense

Anthropology, World Modelling, and the Vernacular
Construction of Reality and Belonging

Edited by

Bonnie Urciuoli and Chaise LaDousa



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Acknowledgments

We begin by thanking Ilana Gershon for inviting us to participate in her 2021 American Anthropological Association panel, “How Folklore Persuades in its Travels,” addressing (as Ilana’s abstract put it) ‘so-called “folkloric” forms of evidence and authority’ in contemporary contexts. That theme was the seed of this project, and the panel was the origin of half the chapters in the volume. We deeply appreciate Ilana’s enthusiastic encouragement at the beginning and along the way. We further appreciate Richard Bauman and Asif Agha for their helpful encouragement and insightful discussion as we developed this project.

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Introduction

The Social Organization of ‘Reality’

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Signs and World Modelling

The worlds that people live in are made of more than ‘just the facts.’ What people take as real or true or common sense emerges from how they connect with each other, how they perceive signs of belonging, how they become an *us*. Reality intertwines with relationships and identities: people model worlds that fit their perceptions of themselves in relation to those they see as like them. Such questions have long interested scholars in the often-intersecting fields of folklore studies and sociocultural, linguistic, and semiotic anthropology. Drawing from these fields, the chapters in this book explore how people perceive and construct worlds in relation to those with whom they share them.

We use the term ‘world modelling’¹ (borrowed from folklore and mythology as elaborated in Chapter 9) to describe such reality creation. People are social actors who act in meaningful ways. They jointly select, perceive, interpret, and act on signs – meaningful elements – that fit the premises of their social lives. Signs form overall patterns of common understanding, identity, values, common sense. As people act on signs to build knowledge, they routinely do so in localized, familiar – i.e. vernacular – ways and seek legitimation from those of *us* they most readily trust. We explored these points in a panel assembled by Ilana Gershon for the 2021 meetings of the American Anthropological Association which, as she put it in the panel description, sought papers that would examine ‘so-called “folkloric” forms of evidence and authority’ in contemporary contexts, not as transplantations but as intricately co-constitutive with other processes of social life. This volume had its genesis (including earlier versions of four of the eight papers) in that panel, and that co-constitution is variously explored throughout this book.

World modelling is semiotic: It is based on signs. People perceive their worlds in terms of signs which they interpret systematically. Language is a system of signs (e.g. words, grammar) as is discourse, how people use language (e.g. accent, word choice).

1. While the term world modelling sometimes occurs in cognitive studies (in reference to the processing of sensory data) and in computational studies and AI work (in reference to simulations of reality), neither takes up cultural differentiation in the social semiotic sense we develop here.

Beyond language, anything meaningful in people's social worlds is made of signs – ways of acting and dressing, skin color, objects, landscapes, etc. What may be obvious as signs to some may be meaningless to others. In that sense, all signs are learned, which is the basis of culture.² People may perceive signs (singly or in combination) as images or qualities (iconic), connections or causes (indexical), or conventions (symbolic).³ What is or is not a sign, and how to interpret signs, is coordinated by certain 'meta' signs that frame or govern the interpretations of other signs; that is, they are metasemiotic.⁴ People work out these governing frameworks as they interact, constructing what they take as real without seeing themselves doing so. They operate in what Holland et al. (1998, 52) describe as figured worlds, 'socially and culturally constructed realm[s] of interpretation in which particular characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others.'

Both of us have written about aspects of reality construction. In LaDousa's (2011) study of signs (quite literally!) that undergraduates at Miami University of Ohio put on their rental houses, he shows how understanding the student humor in such signs depends on understanding that student life is heavily guided by the general principle that outside of classwork, student life is about having a good time and not taking things seriously. For faculty and administrators, that guiding principle does not exist. Urciuoli (1996) describes two contrasting linguistic realities for working class bilingual Puerto Ricans: At home, elements of English and Spanish form a single system of discourse as they cannot, say, in 'white' dominant domains like work or school.

Many ethnographies have examined people's sense of 'what is real' in relation to what holds them together socially. Since most people take for granted that their own reality is everyone else's, readers especially notice realities unlike their own, as in Favret-Saada's (1980) study of witchcraft in the French Bocage or Lepselter's (2016) account of people sharing experiences of alien abduction, both focused on how people construct such realities. Hochschild wrote her studies (2016, 2024) of the everyday reality of conservative rural voters to show outsiders how that reality is embedded in the social and economic conditions of their daily lives. These studies explore connections among reality construction and the organization of social life, but they are also studies of groups regarded by outsiders as marginal, and of realities that outsiders dismiss as mistaken. Less examined are realities taken for granted by most people. Mukhopadhyay, Henze, and Moses (2025) extensively document the racialization built over the course of (and starting before) U.S. history that most Americans consider 'real.' In demonstrating the nature of race as a social construction, the authors outline the signs of race that practitioners of science, medicine, and

2. We simplify this introductory discussion for those new to semiotic/linguistic anthropology, to whom we also recommend Ahearn's excellent introductory textbook *Living Language* (any edition). More advanced readers will recognize the Silversteinian-Peircean (Silverstein 1976; Peirce 1955) foundations of this discussion. Connecting social process and reality construction (minus the detailed emphasis on signs) is also central to Bourdieu's (1977 and elsewhere) notion of habitus and is most classically developed by Berger and Luckmann (1966).
3. These glosses invoke specifically Peircean (Peirce 1955) principles of firstness (qualities), secondness (indexicality) and thirdness (conventional, learned associations).
4. Metasemiosis plays out by orienting social actors, implicitly or explicitly, toward certain interpretations and away from others (Parmentier 1994, 128).

law have reinforced as ‘real,’ and their results on people’s lives. We draw particular attention to this work because it is hard for realms of reality construction to carry more authority than science, medicine, and law.

Differences in world construction can be quite subtle or quite marked. People may assume a shared reality until some serious sign of difference pops up: ‘You don’t act (or look or sound) X!’ or ‘You voted for *who*?’ People may believe they have nothing in common yet share the same sense of the world for the most part. Each chapter explores variously shared dimensions of social reality construction and connection: constructions of death and national belonging; social phenomena ambivalently experienced by those living with it or unambivalently crafted toward a particular end; academic rationales used to establish identity or stance; constructions of explicit *us–them* contrasts. Throughout we see social activity carried out through discourse. In each chapter, people engage in or value activities that enhance a reality not so clear to others: commemorating lost lives; promoting mushrooms for health rather than as food; representing a language variety as a marker of place versus speakers’ social experience of it; establishing identity and authority through academic rationales; defining one’s place in the world by drawing sharp lines of contrast. Each chapter explores how people see themselves as part of their world, what they take as evidence of rightful or valued belonging. The *us* at the center of those processes and worlds is not given or static, but is always in formation, a continual project.

Discourse and the Emergence of Shared Interpretation

Although only some of this volume’s chapters address language or take a linguistic anthropological approach, all pay attention to *how* people use language, that is, to discourse as social action. People use language to not only give information but to assert themselves, persuade others, and establish their place in the world. In this way, the use of language has social functions. To use and understand these functions, people rely on implicit guides to interpretation, ‘meta’ level signs that point them toward interpretations of specific signs (e.g., tone of voice signaling ‘joke’ or invocation of authority signaling ‘objective fact’). Basso (1979) illustrates Apache uses of exaggerated ‘white’ English elements that metacommunicate an onset of satirical ‘joking’ routines which reinforce the distinctiveness of Apache and white social and cultural realities. People rely on such meta-level (or metasemiotic – see footnotes 4 and 5) guides (or frames or principles or regimes), to recognize and interpret signs, and thus construct what they take as real or really happening. These are shared or not insofar as people do or do not recognize the same signs. Some operate as master (or meta-) narratives, as when various stories are all organized in roughly the same way, variations on one general type. Lepselter (2016) shows how master narratives organize how people tell and understand particular stories of alien abduction, pointing to key notions or values shared by story tellers. Their individual stories fit a general pattern, that what happened to them is real. Mould (2020) shows the operation of master narratives in circulating black ‘welfare queen’ stories that reinforce the reality of a white sense of race. Powerful metasemiotic regimes may be tucked away, unnoticed by outsiders, into defined or enclosed social spaces. Using Urban’s (2001) concept of metaculture, i.e. a cultural sign that points to a general interpretation of other signs, LaDousa

(2011) shows how students write clever messages (often puns about the residents) on physical signs on their rental houses to indicate that student life outside the classroom is about 'fun.' The house sign itself (not its message) is metacultural. Faculty, who miss the metacultural nature of house signs, worry about the messages' literal implications. Metasemiotic regimes may reinforce external authority: López-Espino (2024) shows how child welfare lawyers and court officials describe children's parents' discourse (i.e. metapragmatics, language describing how people use language) in ways that reinforce their own authorized reality, while undercutting that of parents.⁵ A metasemiotic regime shaping one part of people's lives may be recast in another: Gershon (2024, 7) shows how during Covid-19, people used workplace experience "to make sense of their own niche in the political universe."

While the metasemiotic regimes underlying the chapters of this book are not always explicit, they are perceptible in how people understand death or mushrooms or their own language use or institutional knowledge or beliefs about disease or language. These regimes require discursive work to remain in operation and if some of them disappeared, little might change otherwise. Even when they are highly contrastive, they might pass unnoticed if people don't talk about politics or religion or national identity.

What people consider important knowledge indexes – connects with or points to – how social relations are established, enacted, and maintained, a connection that people routinely tune out. Tuning out the social underpinnings of what one knows is probably characteristic of what people consider 'knowledge.' Some see knowledge as institutionally produced, e.g. science, technology, history; some as revealed truth, e.g. religion. Some equate knowledge with what the like-minded read, talk about, or post on social media while resisting 'mainstream media' or 'elite' sources. But most people do believe that there *is* such a thing as knowledge and that it is *real*.

For those modelling a world, making it make sense means constantly making the meaning of its parts coherent. Hence our emphasis on the social nature of world modelling. While we remain neutral on what does or does not count as knowledge, we argue that whatever people think knowledge is, whatever they take as real, important, valued, or defining, exists because people perceive it as coherent. Language plays a central part in maintaining that coherence, not only through conveying information (reference), but through *how* people do so. People express authority, act persuasively or playfully, try to sound authoritative or eloquent, and so on. These uses of language – that is, discourse functions – occur in combination. Reference is continually combined with personal and interpersonal uses that express what Jaffe (2009) analyzes as sociolinguistic stance, e.g. interpersonal or epistemic positioning in discourse. Makihara and Rodríguez (2025) emphasize that people don't just take stances, they make them: People align themselves as subjects with their object of reference in particular relationships built on particular perspectives. So the 'things'

5. *Meta* signals an aspect of a system organizing how that system works. Metasemiotic means how signs organize a system of signs. Metacultural means how cultural signs organize a system of cultural signs. Metanarrative means the narrative principle guiding interpretation of specific stories. Metapragmatic is commentary that indicates or typifies how people use language (such as accents or style). Metalinguistic is language explaining language principles (as grammars and dictionaries do).

people refer to are not simply 'there' but are linked to a whole pattern of signs and interpretation, all linked to their relations among each other. In that sense, as Agha (2007) explains, reference is socially indexical – 'unavoidably social' (2007, 84) – linked to feelings, affect, sense perceptions, and other qualities (as we see throughout the book), all interpreted as learned patterns. As notions emerge that people refer to, they become part of the shared furniture of social reality, part of what *we* share. So not only is reference unavoidably social, it also emerges from social realities that people continually create.

The social relations in which all this happens are most oriented toward the local and familiar, but their orientation can also range to the more distant and unfamiliar. They can take place in person, in social, news, and entertainment media, in publication. However they take place, they constitute a community of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991) with a characteristic participant structure by which social actors recognize and play out their roles germane to situations/events (Philips 1983). World modelling moves across different scales including 'face-to-face' interaction and various forms of media, visual and print, all of which are *social* even if 'online' requires a particular technology. Agha (2011a) argues that what people routinely call 'media' is better thought of as 'mediatized' in terms of 'institutionalized practices that reflexively link processes of communication to processes of commoditization' with 'mediatized objects . . . transformed through activities of semiotic mediation' (2011a, 163). Contrasts like large/small, macro/micro and so on that people think of as differences in scale are not pre-ordained. Rather, as Carr and Lempert (2016) argue, people work them out in ongoing social processes, their outcomes accumulating across interactions, i.e. interdiscursively (Agha 2005; Silverstein 2005). In this way, what Agha (2011b) calls mediatized figures of personhood may emerge 'scaled up' in ways indexing their participant structure in a community that does not meet in person, reified as a sort of place (*in* print, *online*) with a feeling of fixed reality. Nor is scaling up a particularly recent social phenomenon. What Anderson (1983) calls imagined communities, which he links to the inculcation of national belonging, depend on scaling up, on shared representations of public figures that most people do not actually know.

When people scale up their world of *us*, affect can be central, as Pritzker and Perrino (2021) show in their discussion of 'scalar intimacy.' People tell stories that connect themselves to larger narratives based on what they see as a shared identity-defining quality (with family, language, nation). They zoom in and pan out to show their intimate connections to a bigger picture that casts such identity-defining qualities as part of a larger set of values. Though scalar intimacy has existed in print, movies, radio, and television, the internet now plays an enormous part. Much of online community formation is organized by narrative devices connecting users with others 'like me' following one or more threads of identity, intimacy, and value from themselves to a bigger, more public, and often heroic picture. Much advertising and branding is built on such devices, and (in not unrelated ways) some people's visions of themselves in cultural narratives are linked to sports, pop culture, religious, and political figures. (I can 'just do it' as sports star product endorsers 'just do it' because we share the same defining 'passion'.)

Given the influence of electoral politics, it is worth considering what such scaling tells us about who votes for whom. Political analysts ask how voters in demographic

X can support candidates with no record of interest in the welfare of X people. But voters, as social actors, frame their perceptions of candidates not as demographics but as affiliations and oppositions. Voters' perceptions of whether candidates have their interests at heart tend to be framed by who is or is not 'like me' and 'like me' is critical in scaling-up to an imagined political (or any other kind of) community. 'Like me' may be aspirational rather than actual: I see candidate X presented as I want to see myself or in ways I value. As people construct their social worlds, they do so along paths marked by signs of the familiar, safe, and right versus opposing signs of the unfamiliar, dangerous, and wrong. These alignments and oppositions may not correspond to political demographics or even conventional political alignment.⁶ They involve the kind of scalar intimacy described above. The same goes for those identifying with sports and entertainment figures. The value acquired in the scaled-up world, as Pritzker and Perrino note, seems to flow into and boost one's value throughout one's social world. And the metanarrative of the scaled-up world may well clarify and simplify how one sees events throughout one's world.

Knowledge Production, Discourse Function, Vernacular Practice, and Folklore

Since people create knowledge through discourse, any situation of knowledge creation will involve all the discourse functions people engage in. People pass on information; they also gossip, tell stories, kid around, and play with language, all depending on who is involved, in what relation to each other, to what end and in what context. Multiple functions take place at the same time as noted by Jakobson (1960), Hymes (1974), and Silverstein (1976). People rarely interpret what is said only as reference, though they may say they do. Persuasion, alliance creation, keeping relationships sorted out, sounding good or clever or powerful or credible or right all reinforce the effect of reference, often mattering as much or more than the information itself. How people take reference, spoken or written, may depend on how eloquently, authoritatively, persuasively – and, of course, by whom – it is said. Reference alone tends to be indigestible or at least forbidding, as technical descriptions and diagrams can be. Science writing is effectively opened to non-specialists when the writer knows how to be poetic or playful or, as Schrempp (2012) notes, invoke the mythic: 'in attempting to make the findings of science humanly compelling, [writers] fall back on or reinvent in sly and subtle variation the anthropocentrically motivated devices of traditional mythologies' (2012, 4).

As noted earlier, what people consider knowledge varies. For some, knowledge is institutionally produced to describe an objective reality and may include testing current truths (science, history, etc.). For some, truth is unchangeably embedded in originary history and succeeding knowledge must be coherent with original truths (legal originalism or religious fundamentalism). How knowledge is classified (science,

6. For example, after the 2024 election, U.S. Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (NY-14), a progressive Democrat, was surprised to find that many constituents had voted for her and Republican president-elect Trump, and asked them to post why they voted for such politically opposite figures. Voters said each candidate had qualities that voters valued: both political outsiders, both signified change, both 'real' (Harvey 2024).

history) or set up oppositionally (science versus religion) points to the values and positions of those doing the classifying. The idea of unconditional knowledge obscures the contingencies of knowledge production before enshrinement in textbooks (Latour and Woolgar 1979). But however knowledge is classified, its production includes social activities across social spaces, so cannot exclude non-referential interaction. Academic and scientific knowledge production takes place in sites (labs, conferences, field sites, classrooms) where people often know each other well. The sites may be identified with the institutional modern,⁷ but relationships cannot be kept apart from poetic, playful, expressive, and otherwise social discourse that performance-oriented research in folklore and linguistic anthropology has linked to informal, familiar, and routinized vernacular culture.

Bauman (2008) describes the vernacular, in contrast to the cosmopolitan, as the pull toward 'the informal, immediate, locally grounded, proximal' (2008, 33), the routine and familiar social relations seen as characteristic of folklore production. Such relations also occur in workplaces and institutions that seem the opposite of vernacular but for people whose lives revolve around their professions, these venues often do become informal, immediate, and local. Many informal discourse practices develop in venues where academic, scientific and medical knowledge is produced, venues into which we have some ethnographic glimpses of labs, schools, and workplaces where we also find informal, familiar, and routinized relations where the production of formal knowledge may easily co-occur, unnoticed, with social functions shared by people on very familiar terms. For example, knowledge formation in medical school has (in the past and perhaps still) been intertwined with casually, sometimes humorously, expressed assumptions about gender, race, and class hierarchies; otherwise, the class, race, and gender-based 'humor' of the medical school skits analyzed by Segal (1984) would not have seemed funny to their 1980s audiences of students and faculty. And as Martin's (1987) study of medical textbook and doctor-patient relations shows, those assumptions have been deeply embedded in medical instruction and practice, sometimes intertwined with expressions of authority embedded, again, in hierarchic assumptions about gender, class, and race. If discourse processes characteristic of vernacular culture do leave such traces in medical instruction and textbooks, any form of institutionalized knowledge creation can bear traces of such history.

Similarly, while the labs and offices of high-energy physicists may seem like formal venues for knowledge production, Traweek (1988) shows how gossip and stories figure into notions of 'a good physicist'; that in turn might affect some aspect of what physicists recognize as good physics. Outside of science, Lewis's (1989) memoir of bond trading at Salomon Brothers, *Liar's Poker*, shows how some Wall Street work is learned in the context of quite gendered and very playful performance; it also points to the construction and emergence of figures of authority and power. This matters a great deal when one considers that assumptions about truth and reality routinely depend as much on the status of who endorses them as on whether they can be proven true or real. Authorized assumptions may circulate as quasi-proverbial bits of received wisdom, as formulaic statements of authority, as advice or aphorisms from the more

7. Gershon and Taylor (2008) point out how 'modern' institutions maintain that sense by providing a place for (non-modern) 'culture' in acultural modern spaces.

to less experienced or the inside expert to the outside non-expert, or senior to junior, or authorized (and authoritative) to non-authorized.

Is there a sharp line between ‘vernacular’ and ‘non-vernacular’ knowledge production? Modernist ideologies (dare we call them folk theories?) of knowledge treat classifications as given, knowledge as fixed, and ‘folklore’ as separate from and opposite to institutionalized knowledge. But a consequence of the approach taken here is this: Whether or not some form of knowledge is considered folklore, we argue that, in the process of knowledge production, there is no sharp line between what involves vernacular discourse and what does not. Bits of knowledge trailing vernacular history can turn up in any knowledge classification. To that end, we find most useful the argument by Valk (2023) for the value of the term *vernacular* to signify a focus on what people actually do, in studies within and outside of the specific realm of folklore. Speaking of such binaries as oral-literary or belief-knowledge, Valk (2023, 6) writes, ‘In textual practices, “vernacular” has become a hybrid concept that undermines such dichotomies and reveals their dialectic cohesion.’ Rather than replacing the idea of folklore, he argues, the idea of the vernacular ‘opens it up in relations with other cultural phenomena . . . often seen as the “others” of folklore’ (Valk 2023, 7). (See also discussion of vernacular in Chapter 9.) That opening-up, that focus on practice, is our point here. Throughout the eight case studies in this volume, we see how world modelling points to those doing the modelling, how they do it, who they do it for, who they do it with, and how they make that understanding make sense to each other whether or not it is ‘officially’ recognized as knowledge. The idea of the vernacular is central to world modelling.

Creating and Maintaining Us

Gal and Irvine (2019) argue that people organize their perceptions of the world along series of related contrasts which they call *axes of differentiation*. These axes are made up of signs that align with other signs and that contrast with alignments of opposing signs. They sustain people’s sense of being social actors. Social actors may differ considerably in what they take as signs and how they align and interpret them. Some perceive element X as a sign; others do not. X may be different signs to different people. Different sets of people may perceive sign X in different alignments of other signs. All these configurations can point to different senses of *us* which, if they vary intensely enough, lead to what Slotta (2019) terms ‘epistemic bubbles’ inhabited by those sharing and recognizing signs of great importance to them and only them.⁸ The idea of sign alignment and contrast is also useful for rethinking the folkloric notion of motifs, the ‘building block’ units from which tales are built (see also Chapter 9), as signs in semiotic alignments and contrast.

Thus, what people perceive as signs, and the qualities they affiliate with signs (how signs are pictured, what feelings they invoke), point to how people perceive and value their places in their worlds. These semiotic ideologies – interpretations of what the

8. Slotta (2019) compares how people in right wing media speech chains perceive meaning and coherence in the rhetoric of then-President Trump as signs of circulation whose alignment is recognized as, and points to, a shared reality.

world is through these semiotic alignments – are partial and may go unperceived if not looked for. They are also always subject to change. New ones can grow incrementally from existing ones. Silverstein's (2003) concept of indexical ordering is useful here. Metasemiotic regimes are organized as indexical orders in that what signs in a given order index, or point to, are consistent with each other. Indexical orders can shift as social ideologies shift. In one order, a pronunciation or word choice might point to where someone is from, but from that can grow an order in which those linguistic elements point to a social stereotype linked with that place. Multiple such orders exist in any society. The world modelling addressed in this book consists of these ongoing semiotic processes, linked or opposed in ways that may or may not be obvious.

Most importantly, people continually create a sense of contrast defining who they are and are not. The contrast element is key – so much of how people construct what they believe is real, or at least what matters, is in contrast to what they reject or find wrong or threatening. The contrast can range from slight to quite sharp, and, as Hill and Irvine (1992) argue, is linked to perceptions of responsibility and evidence. Social actors' sense of what is or is not true or real depends greatly on who and what they take as authorized and responsible. What social actors take as evidence depends on who *should* have the authority to say what is true or real, in ways that may have little to do with what is or is not empirically demonstrable.

People's varying recognition and alignment of signs, and varying notions of authority sources all play into the construction of *us/them* contrasts. They are especially reinforced by moral panics, a concept developed by Cohen (1972) in his case study of the 1960s British media treatment of youth groups dubbed Mods and Rockers. Moral panics very effectively focus a sense of *us/them*. They are common in public discourse, especially politics and religion, and sell a lot of media. They arise when voices of social authority, especially scaled-up figures in prominent social media channels, emphatically broadcast the dangers posed by some (generally marginalized or powerless or low-status) social group depicted as socially dangerous, such as immigrants who do not look or speak like the 'native-born.' These dynamics saturate public and private life. The construction of sharply differentiated metasemiotic regimes has become a media industry all too influential in everyday vernacular practices that form everyday realities.⁹

In some way, all this must be anchored in human psychology. Lacan's social-cognitive arguments about the emergence of self provide a starting point. The mirrored perception of self during infancy serves as the beginning of a socially mediated perception of the world, including learning, as a social being, to desire what others desire. Through language and in an ongoing process, the self takes its place in

9. When crime and horror comic books emerged in the U.S. in the 1930s–1950s, they were castigated by educational and other public authorities as illiterate, transgressive, and dangerous. Hajdu (2008) points out in *The Ten-Cent Plague* that among the ironies of the early 1950s moral panic visited on comic books was psychologist Wertham's (1954) allegedly scientific *Seduction of the Innocent* based on Wertham's opinions (backed by no research) that all comics (especially *Superman*) cause juvenile delinquency (Hajdu 2008, 43). Similar moral panics have been directed to rock & roll, rock, rap and hip-hop, all genres that, like crime and horror comic books, were developed by young people engaged in vernacular production and typified as socially dangerous. We see comparable dynamics in recent moral panics over young people's use of video games and cell phones, not to mention their linguistic habits.