Research Overview

Reading/Writing Complicities

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The more uncertain I have felt about myself, the more there has grown up in me a feeling of kinship with all things. In fact it seems to me as if that alienation which so long separated me from the world has become transferred into my own inner world, and has revealed to me an unexpected unfamiliarity with myself.


My grandmother, father and grandfathers, foremothers and forefathers, are no longer here, but they are never absent. They left their traces on my family and me, and leave, and will leave. And here I find myself reading and writing them into being, as these (and other) specters’ reading and writing constitute my life. It is on the brink between the spectral and nonspectral where we meet, regularly, daily, at this very moment, mobilizing each other to mobilize ourselves, moving and being moved. As we watch the interplay of self and other, subjective and objective, physical and metaphysical, intelligible and unintelligible, turning round and round in circles of deconstruction, I ask myself: Who is watching? Are they watching me? Are we meeting each other by looking in the same mirror? At times, all I see and know seem reflections resulting from this ghostreading and ghostwriting. And I find solace in the idea that I will never know them—or myself. So I conclude, for the interim, that it is in the halting of my/our chasing, my/our haunting, where mourning ends, temporarily, creating a semblance of peace.

As Derrida (1988, 1995) has suggested, spoken and written texts leave traces that allow individual and collective identities to become inscribed, imprinted, impressed, and archived. As textual agents (Cooren, 2004), verbal accounts and written documents (e.g., diaries, euthanasia declarations, or wills) play a central role in the retrospective sensemaking (Weick, 2006) through which we construct our narratives and narrative identities, thus making important differences in the ways our lives unfold. Reading and writing are therefore vital, in the most literal sense of the word, to making our selves and the selves of others present, again and again, even if we (or these oth-
ers) are physically absent (Derrida, 1994). They allow those who are not present to speak to those who are, and those who are present to speak on behalf of those who are not.

There are as many advantages as disadvantages to being attached to texts, to haunt them as they haunt us, especially during processes of mourning, conflict, or disaster (see Brummanns, 2003, 2007b, 2011). We may wish to hold on to them and invoke them repeatedly because they guide us in our attempts to make sense of impermanence, discord, and loss. But we also need to refrain from granting textual agents too much agency in instances like these (or in any instance, for that matter), since they may lead us astray and prevent us from acting “in harmony with the texture of the situation at hand” (Varela, 1999, p. 31). One of the aims of my work, then, is to raise awareness about the continuous “dance of agency” (Pickering, 1995, p. 21, italics in original; see also Pickering & Guzik, 2008, p. vii) brought about through our reading and writing, and to ask: Who or what controls the degree to which we are haunted by the textual specters/spectral texts that we bring to life and that keep us alive? To what extent are we under or above their influence (Latour, forthcoming)? To what extent can we recall the deconstruction that is “always already at work [in texts]” (Derrida, 1986, p. 73; see also Derrida, 1991), or (readily) suppress this recalling because it destabilizes us? To what degree do we suffer, in this regard, from what Derrida (1995) calls “archive fever,” and what are its effects?

Questions like these require modes of inquiry capable of dealing with the fact that meaning is always open and phantom-like, constructed through endless interplays between what is and what is not, creating an ongoing deferral of interpretation or différence (Derrida, 1976). I often resort to autoethnographic methods to explore people’s search for meaning and connection while these processes of deconstruction unravel (e.g., during the closing stages of my father’s and grandfather’s life, or during interactions between monks in a remote Buddhist monastery in the Indian Himalayas; see Brummanns, 2003, 2007a, 2007b, 2008, 2009, 2011). By engaging in these practices, I try to deal with the fact that I, as a researcher, am just as much caught up in these processes. They allow me to search for ways to “pass along” with the people I am studying and to reflect on our complicities (Marcus, 1997, 2001; see also Couldry, 2003). Thus, it is not only I, the researcher, who is trying to understand a presumed other; this other is also trying to understand me. During our fieldwork interactions, and even after them, spectrally speaking, other and I are trying to figure out each other, attempting to find a rhythm that allows us both to move with the ongoing flows of textualization and sensemaking. At times this dance may feel like an elegant waltz, whereas at other times it may feel like an impassioned tango. Sometimes our complicities may comfort us and create a kind of intimacy or closeness; in other moments they may create barriers and distances, making us feel awkward, out of place, and out of sync. The ongoing challenge of academic investigation lies in attempting to read and inscribe the constitutive effects of these communicative moves, while remaining aware of the infinite cycles of deconstruction at work within the interactions between those specters perceived as others and those perceived as myself.
Notes
1. To “presentifying” us, as François Cooren (2006) would say.
2. Or, as Eleanor Rosch (2008) stated, “fully in contact with the realities and needs of the situation” (p. 153).
3. (Non)participant observation, (in)formal interviewing, archival research, introspection, and reflection, involving the use of video/audio recording, photography, reading, taking field notes, and poetic, reflexive writing.

References
Cooren, François. (2006). The organizational world as a plenum of agencies. In F. Cooren, J. R. Taylor, & E. J. van Every (Eds.), Communication as organizing: Practical approaches to research into the dynamic of text and conversation (pp. 81-100). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

