

## **Returning to Text: Affect, meaning making and literacies**

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## Returning to Text: Affect, meaning making and literacies

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### Abstract

Existing work on literacy and affect has posed important questions for how we think about meanings and how and where they get made. The authors contribute to such work by focusing on the relation between text and affect. This is a topic that has received insufficient attention in recent work but is of pressing concern for education as text interweaves in new ways with human activity, through social media, surveillance capitalism, and artificial intelligence—ways that can be unpredictable and poorly understood. Adopting a sociomaterial sensibility that foregrounds the relations between bodies (people and things), the authors provide conceptual tools for considering how texts affect and are affected by the heterogeneous entanglements from which they emerge. In situating their argument, the authors outline influential readings of Spinoza's theories of affect, explore how these have been mobilized in literacy research, and identify how text has been accommodated within such research. Using texts from a political episode in the United Kingdom, the authors explore the idea of social-material-textual affects to articulate relationships among humans, nonhumans, meaning making, and literacies. The authors conclude by identifying four ways in which text participates in what happens, raising questions about how different materializations of text (or indeed "not text") are significant to the diversifying communicative practices that inflect social, cultural, economic, and political life.

**Key words:** literacy, affect, technology, sociomaterial, text

In rich descriptions of everyday activity, something that we call literacy seems to emerge out of a complex and perhaps rather messy array of diverse materials, bodies and impulses. The specifically human activities of literacy - those socially recognized forms of representation, are always surrounded by a constellation of things. Some are necessary to the business of meaning-making, some peripheral, and others more or less random. Most studies of literacy focus their attention on human activity allowing other dimensions to fade into the background, aggregated together as context. Such accounts of literacy enact a separation, a separation between human preoccupations and all the rest, between the social and the material, and ultimately between culture and nature. This is a separation that has been critiqued, albeit in different ways, by numerous influential social theorists (for example: Barad, 2003; Braidotti, 2013; Haraway, 2016; Latour, 1993). Applied to literacy studies this critique prompts us to ask whether there are ways of thinking about meaning making and literacy that avoid such separation whilst still identifying something that is observable or even teachable.

Over the last decade a number of attempts have been made in this direction. Amongst these attempts, theories of affect have gained considerable traction in providing different ways of considering those aspects of literacy practice that escape rationalist accounts. Extant work on literacy and affect has posed significant challenges for how to think about meanings and how and where they are made. These are questions that are of fundamental concern to literacy, schooling, social justice and political process at all levels. A paradox faced by literacy researchers who are working to escape the separations we refer to above is that, in the process of flattening out relations and arguing for the permeability of literacy, an emphasis on affect can sidestep questions related to *text* that have particular pertinence in contemporary literacy studies. This is happening at a time when new kinds of textual politics are shaping our lives through the weaponization of social media (Davies, 2019), the threat of surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019) and the development of artificial intelligence (Harari, 2018).

Textual representations are interweaving in new ways with human activity, and whereas these can be facilitating and empowering, they can also limit, distort or channel the kinds of meanings that are made. By doing this they sustain certain kinds of political, economic and environmental interests over others. In this article we argue that, whilst the process of foregrounding affect may work to blur boundaries between literacy and other kinds of activity, it is important not to lose sight of text. Our contribution here therefore is to revisit and reframe textual meaning in the context of debate on literacy and affect.

In what follows we argue for research that foregrounds the diverse ways in which texts affect and are affected by people and things in the heterogeneous entanglements from which they emerge. In the context of a growth of interest in non-representational theory in literacy research, we revisit representation. To support this project, we develop a sociomaterial account that describes meaning in terms of *social-material-textual affect*. This perspective leads us to four key ideas which we propose have potential for articulating the role of text in contemporary society. We argue that these four ideas not only generate new perspectives on familiar literacy practices, but that they also have particular purchase in interrogating new textual practices and representations associated with networked communication - practices that are beginning to impact on education (Nichols & Stornaiuolo, 2019).

This article begins with a general overview of the ways in which text has been conceptualized in relation to literacy, and how recent work on literacy and affect has challenged such conceptualizations. Specifically, we trace the influence of Spinoza's theory of affect in literacy research, highlighting how text has been conceived within such work. In addressing what is arguably a move away from text, we draw on a sociomaterial perspective to develop the idea of meaning as social-material-textual affect, as an alternative account of the relationship between humans, non-humans, meaning making and literacies. Texts from a recent political episode in the UK are used to illustrate how these ideas might be put to work. The example indicates some of the ways in which new kinds of textual representations are insinuating themselves into educational contexts. This analysis leads to the identification of four key ideas that we propose have potential to illuminate the increasingly complex ways in which texts entangle with everyday life.

### **Conceptualizations of text**

Descriptions and definitions have long rested on the idea that text brings into being things that are not immediately apparent or present. Whether we think of 19<sup>th</sup> century novels, transatlantic telegraphs, or family Whatsapp groups, texts work to record, regulate and relay messages by layering in a space-time connection by the use of a shared code (Bryant, 2014). Texts themselves could be seen as more or less complex ensembles of signs constituting socially recognized semiotic resources. As such they are deeply embedded in social, economic, political and intellectual life (Snaza, 2019) working as much to control and exclude as to liberate and enrich (as in the humanist tradition). Over time different conceptualizations of text have percolated through public discourse, literacy research, and educational debate. These vary from those emphasizing fixity in form and function of different types of texts (e.g. Kendeou et al., 2009), to those foregrounding the relationship between context and genre (Halliday, 1978; Martin & Rothery, 1986; Christie, 1987), through to those influenced by developments in critical theory and poststructuralist thought that shift attention from textual authority and authorship to a concern for interpretation and meaning making (Barthes, 1967; Kristeva, 1967; Derrida, 1967). Significantly, the latter expanded conceptions of text to include a wide range of media, including still and moving image and music (Barthes, 1977). In recent years, conventional thinking about text has, in many ways, been fundamentally tested by the communicative practices that have evolved

with the widespread use of digital technologies. Kress (2003), for example - in response to the 'new media age' - approached text as any instance of human communication regardless of the mode or modes of its realization. And alongside the more obvious material changes in how texts are produced, circulated and consumed, scholars have noted differences in the relationship between texts, their stability over time (Barton & Lee, 2013), and a blurring of the boundaries between reading, writing and other semiotic modes (Jewitt, 2006).

These conceptualizations of text differ in their attention to context, convention, modality and meaning, but all adopt an anthropocentric view centred on human concerns, purposes and practices combined with ideas about the stability or durability of text as a physical or semiotic object. Materiality, in these accounts, is nearly always given secondary consideration. Tools and media are seen as material adjuncts deployed in the production and consumption of meaning, in favour of an emphasis on relations between humans and text. As Snaza (2019, p.88) points out, an anthropological influence on the disciplinary framework of literacy studies has contributed to a 'factoring out' of non-human agencies. It is these ideas, and related issues, that have been challenged through recent work exploring literacy and affect. This work on affect draws on a variety of sources (see Wetherell, 2015 for a critical overview). Here, in order to further our argument we pursue one of these, tracing how readings of Spinoza's theory of affect have been taken up and put to work in literacy studies, with an emphasis on conceptualizations of text.

### **Thinking/feeling with affect in literacy research**

The ideas of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza are an important shaping force in contemporary thinking about affect in the arts and social sciences. To summarize albeit briefly, in Spinoza's ontology both the human and the non-human are part of a single unfolding substance. This forms the foundation of a philosophy of becoming, which is characterized by multiple encounters between bodies. These encounters are described by Spinoza as emotions or affects:

By EMOTION (*affectus*) I understand the modifications of the body by which the power of action of the body is increased or diminished, aided or restrained, and at the same time the idea of these modifications. (Spinoza, 1910, p.84-85)

In other words affect in Spinoza's philosophy is always relational, the outcome of an encounter, and as such is part of a broader, ongoing process of becoming.

In his influential commentary, Deleuze (1988) draws out the subtlety of the concept of affect in Spinoza's *Ethics*, underlining in particular the distinction between the Latin words *affectio* and *affectus*. *Affectio* is described as the active influence of one body upon another (how one *affects* or impacts another), whereas *affectus* aligns with affect as reactive response or sentiment (how one is *affected*) which is seen (as above) in terms of a variation in the capacity to act. In order to fully understand what is being proposed here, however, we need to know that, in Deleuze's reading of Spinoza, a body is not simply synonymous with the corporeality of an individual human lifeform - his commentary in fact goes further: "A body can be anything; it can be an animal, a body of sounds, a mind or an idea; it can be a linguistic corpus, a social body, a collectivity" (Deleuze, 1988, p. 127).

Deleuze's commentary encourages us to consider affect as traversal in terms of both collective states or sensibilities (as in Anderson's, 2014, work on affective atmospheres), individual or pre-personal impressions (see Massumi, 2002) and as a motive force in the heterogeneous assembling of bodies - people, technologies, texts, institutions and so on (as in Bryant, 2011). Affect from the Deleuzian perspective is certainly more than human. Building on this, Bryant (2014) develops a powerful account of the role that "semiotic objects" play in what he calls social assemblages, drawing particular attention to their powers and capacities (affects) rather than their specific qualities or content. Bryant's ideas are pertinent in so far as

they suggest how texts function as bodies, as well as how they may affect and be affected by other bodies. This allows him to hold on to the insights of “semiotically inclined social theorists” whilst “remaining attentive to the power exerted by physical things” (Bryant, 2014, p.9). Bryant’s contribution is important because it runs counter to the dominant belief that affect is somehow independent of signification and meaning (Leys, 2011, p.443) whilst still avoiding the notion that it is exclusively organized through discursive and representational practices. This is a perspective that is of particular relevance to our argument.

Investigating a world in a state of becoming invites a shift of emphasis, prompting us to look for openings and possibilities rather than stability, and to focus on those moments in which movement, interest, curiosity, concern, ordinariness or enthusiasm is generated - in order to think about what happens, about what it *does*, and where it *goes* rather than what it is in definitional or categorical terms. To draw attention to affect then, is to move away from looking at encounters, such as those that occur in educational spaces, as pre-determined, predictable or structured, turning instead to a concern for how they arise, take shape and unfold in the moment. It suggests a method that:

...tries to describe the things that also propel it. Its objects would be subjects. Rather than fixed notions of agency, subjects, objects, bodies and intentions, it would try to more fully describe a world under pressure, the way a present moment can descend like a curtain on a place, the way a world elaborates in prolific forms, taking off in directions, coming to roost on people and practices. (Stewart, 2017, p.197)

This description of method foregrounds the unpredictable, emergent relations that arise as nonhuman and human bodies come into contact with each other, a focus that textures much of the extant work on literacy and affect as we see below and one which, as we go on to explore, has particular implications for thinking about text.

Whether inspired directly by Spinoza’s thinking or indirectly by those building on his ideas, a focus on the unpredictability of emergent relations has become an important theme in recent research on literacy and affect, motivated by developments that are variously geopolitical, sociotechnical or methodological. It has generated new lines of enquiry as well as innovative approaches to fieldwork and representation that grapple with the challenges of accounting for the ephemerality that so often escape analyses of literacy practices (see Leander & Ehret, 2019). For example, research on literacy and affect has emerged in response to: the inequities and injustices perpetuated in precarious times (e.g. Dutro, 2013); the neoliberal educational policies and practices that have sidelined feeling in favour of testing and standardisation (e.g. Boldt, Leander & Lewis, 2015); the changing literacies associated with mobile technologies that bring the human body firmly to the fore (e.g. Hollett & Ehret, 2017); and developments in video technology that have made engaging with what happens moment to moment seem more accessible.

While this growing body of work shares a commitment to foregrounding the non-representational dimensions of literacy in process, affect theory has been applied in different ways and to different effect. Some studies, for example, have drawn attention to how literacies are felt, how they produce or are produced by affective intensities as people, things, places, and the histories and potentialities folded into these, come into relation moment to moment (e.g. Ehret, Boegel & Roya, 2018; Hollett & Ehret, 2015; Levine, 2014). Others have emphasised the process through which meanings crystallise, take off, and dissipate, understanding meaning making as an embodied process compelled by being together with other people and things (e.g. Ehret, Hollett, & Jocius, 2016; Leander & Boldt, 2012; Lenters, 2016; Smith, 2017). And others have explored how literacy can be both colonizing and transformational, explaining why inequitable relations persist as they are produced by and play out in literacy activity (e.g. Kontovourki, 2015; Lagman, 2018), as well as how activity can escape from commonly understood power structures to generate new kinds of activity

(e.g. Catchings, 2016; Cole, 2012; Harding et al., 2018; Tanner, 2017). This diversity of interest illustrates how focusing on affect can open out spaces and possibilities, unsettling habitual arrangements and heightening our sensitivity to surges of energy, changes in direction and shifting ephemeral relations. The studies prompt us to examine what is generated in between:

- individual experiences *and* collective productivities;
- what humans do *and* what other-than-humans do;
- affect as driving activity *and* affect as produced through activity;
- excitement about potential *and* concern about what emerges;
- and a focus on the here-and-now *and* what happens in other times and spaces.

In interrogating such relationality, research exploring literacy and affect provides an important counterpoint to the structural accounts associated with established critical approaches (Massumi, 2015). It has also prompted innovation in educational settings, such as the development of improvisational or responsive approaches (e.g. Lenters & Smith, 2018; Lenters & Whitford, 2019; Thiel, 2015), and re-castings of critical literacy (e.g. Anwaruddin, 2016). Significantly it disrupts individualist, bounded notions of literacy at a time when literacy is both narrowly defined and highly regulated by policy discourses in different jurisdictions. But also it begins to address a pressing imperative for literacy education to support learners and teachers in navigating a complex and often precarious world through sensitising us to and working with what Massumi (2015) calls the politics of affect.

One outcome of research on literacy and affect however has been to de-centre text. Text is presented as part of a relational *mélange*, and as such is important in what it comes to mean within particular relational assemblages. Leander and Boldt, for example, critiqued a text-centric version of literacy that privileges “texts as the final outcome and purpose of literacy practice” (Leander & Boldt, 2012, p.28). In an alternative conception, and one influenced by the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1987) and Massumi (2002), they began instead with bodies, arguing that:

Texts are participants in the world, one piece in our everchanging assemblage. Along with material objects, bodies and sensations. A nonrepresentational approach describes literacy activity as not determined by past design projected towards some future redesign, but as living its life in the ongoing present, forming relations and connections across signs, objects, and bodies in often unexpected ways. Such activity is created and fed by an ongoing flow of affective intensities that are different from the rational control of meanings and forms. (Leander & Boldt, 2012, p.36).

Developing these ideas, Hollett & Ehret (2015), present a close analysis of how affective atmospheres were generated and helped to generate the “social texture” of one child’s *Minecraft* play in a hospital as he played together with the researchers, family, professionals and paraphernalia of the ward. They describe how an intimate atmosphere spilled out from the game-playing, infusing other activities, involving human and non-human participants, and unsettling some routine ways of doing and being in the hospital. Their study illustrates how texts affect human participants in multiple ways through participation in relational ensembles, and as such their significant contribution, alongside other studies of literacy and affect cited above, has been to enrich our understanding of literacy practices as about *more than* text. Following similar lines of enquiry, other literacy scholars involved in the development of posthuman approaches have provided compelling descriptions of the moment-to-moment unfolding of meaning. For example, we might turn to the posthuman literacies of Hackett and Somerville (2017) and their exploration of sound and movement in

the early years, or the entanglement of bodies and materials in a writing workshop (Kuby, 2017).

Such applications of affect theory to literacy research have, as argued above, been valuable in many ways, but we suggest that as the focus on text becomes more diffuse, some specific aspects of the *participation* of text may be missed. This is partly because the thingness of texts and their semiotic potential can become conflated, and partly because specific qualities of texts as mediators of meaning across time and space can be elided. While such work is illuminating in many ways, our argument here is that texts remain an important area for investigation, not least because recent technological developments mean that it is increasingly difficult to extract human interactions with texts from the complex human/non-human entanglements in which they assemble. We see this at work, for example, in the dense sociotechnical networks that produce and distribute targeted marketing and propaganda, deep fakes and the propagation of various forms of misinformation.

### **Developments in the materialization of text - text, literacy and affect from a sociomaterial perspective**

In digital environments the relationships between authorship, readership, technology and text have been reconfigured and they are increasingly permeable given developments in machine learning and artificial intelligence and their appropriation for commercial and political purposes. For example, messages such as those exchanged on Twitter aggregate to produce a complex textual web which is multimodal, multi-authored, constantly modifiable, and hyperlinked to other online and offline texts. Add to this the facility for both humans and nonhumans to track and trace online activity and we begin to glimpse a very different textual environment. This is particularly true in relation to new media ecologies, surveillance capitalism, the production, distribution and movement of digital devices. Search histories, movement tracking, consumer preferences and the more subtle data generated by micro-sensors and facial analytics all contribute to the invisible digital labour that we engage in on a regular daily basis (Paakkari et al., 2019). Everyday online activities operate not just at a 'service level' (in buying an item for instance, or participating in an online forum), but at a 'data level' (Hansen, 2015, p.72), for example as algorithms generate online marketing designed to suit the preferences suggested by search habits, or as preferences are aggregated for political purposes. As algorithms become legible to one another, humans do not just participate in situated media practices, but in multiple networks that themselves help to construct the nature of that situatedness. This is a form of unpaid labour in which humans become texts to be read through data analysis and by other machines. Indeed it has been suggested that the "broader philosophical fear is of a society in which people become readable pieces of data, without any recognised interiority" (Davies, 2019, p.178). Moreover, while humans still program the intended logic of such relations, the meanings (and activity) generated may well exceed what was intended, generating unexpected results, as happens for example in automated high-frequency trading in financial markets, in which algorithms interact with one another in sometimes unexpected ways (MacKenzie, 2019). The phenomenon is recognisable in the ways in which more familiar kinds of meanings shift, for example when a novel provokes different interpretations as readers and texts assemble in different times and spaces. However the scale and scope of this is new and as a result there is therefore a pressing need to articulate how texts participate in complex relational ensembles, and to consider the implications of such participation.

In what follows we argue for a sociomaterial approach that brings text back into focus, but one that does so with theories of affect very much to the fore. To illustrate our argument we turn to an example drawn from the UK's tortuous attempts to extricate itself from the European Union.

### Anomaly

*'Anomaly: an odd, peculiar, or strange condition, situation, quality, etc.'* (dictionary.com)

On 25<sup>th</sup> September 2019, the English MP Stella Creasy put out the following message on Twitter concerning what appeared to be propaganda in favour of Britain's withdrawal from the EU (Brexit) "Today parents in Walthamstow contacted me concerned about content of school material on Brexit..." (See Figure 1).



**Figure 1 – Stella Creasy's tweet** (stellacreasy, 2019)about here

Creasy was responding to complaints from parents about material posted on approximately 3000 primary school digital noticeboards by the independent Anomaly group who were contracted to provide content for the boards. According to claims, the presentation provided a summary of the prime minister's approach to Brexit, including phrases such as 'He wants to unite the UK' and 'He has promised Brexit will be done' (Busby, 2019). Anomaly's CEO subsequently claimed that the content had been taken out of context because it was part of a balanced look at recent prime ministers - unrelated to the government's pro-Brexit campaign. However, citing parental concern, Creasy asked the Prime Minister Boris Johnson to declare primary schools Brexit propaganda-free zones. The Prime Minister gave no direct answer to Creasy before parliament, stating only that the government was investing heavily in primary schools. According the Huffington Post (Turnidge, 2019) Anomaly removed the content the following day.

The issue first attracted attention via live coverage on the BBC Parliament channel as Creasy relayed her question to the Prime Minister. Here it fed off the turbulent atmosphere in Westminster - that small chamber in the Houses of Parliament with its green leather



upholstery. This happened on the night after a controversial plan by the Prime Minister to prorogue (or suspend) parliament for five weeks in the run up to a rapidly approaching deadline for a Brexit deal had been declared illegal. Members had been recalled to the House of Commons which was unusually full, standing in the aisles, with shouting, angry gestures, roars of disapproval and - flouting convention - applause. Emotions ran high as opposition politicians repeatedly called for some demonstration of contrition on the part of the Prime Minister, contrition that was not forthcoming. Afterwards much of the commentary focused on the lack of real debate, the toxic atmosphere in the House, and the way that the Prime Minister answered all questions using a small selection of three to four word Tweetable responses apparently designed for a prospective electorate: Invest in the NHS! Invest in Education! Get Brexit done! Creasy's question, asked during this lengthy and combative session, was met with cries of incredulity and cheers of support.

Creasy was quick to tweet the subsequent exchange, summarizing the event as well as embedding a video extract of Prime Minister's Questions. This gathered momentum entering into the febrile political climate outside Westminster, recontextualized in multiple digital and print media and entering into the everyday lives of people who were already shocked, stirred, angered or simply fed up with the seemingly interminable debate and negotiation around Brexit. And all this had its origins in a rather different set of circumstances – the reactions to 'content' that had found its way into primary schools in the first place.

These events have many of the hallmarks of communication in our current milieu. The pervasive influence of social media, the speed and direction in which information can travel, the emergence of a new kind of politics and the attendant issues of fake news and fake reviews. What is now referred to as 'content' can appear overnight in schools without the knowledge or consent of school managers, teachers and parents. And in turn parents can rapidly mobilize, make their voices heard, speaking to those in power (even though in this instance it comes to no avail). Politicians, like Creasy (and Johnson), are also and at the same time curating their own social media profile and, despite the fact that 256 likes and 146 tweets doesn't add up to much on Creasy's Twitter profile, the story was strong enough for it to be syndicated on national news bulletins.

If, in considering this sequence of events, we focus on any one of the texts in its sociocultural context (the Anomaly content, the TV programme or the tweet for example) much of what is important is elided. The human experiences of shock, anger, outrage and frustration and the ways in which these play into a more distributed, widespread affective atmosphere (Anderson, 2014) are stripped away. The participation of non-humans is also taken for granted – the screens, connections, apps and devices that hold things together are ignored. Questions such as what the Anomaly design team really thought they were doing, how they felt about it, and what software they used are swept away, too. Furthermore it is hard to know what images they had access to, who pressed which button, which screens were active, who saw what, under what sort of conditions and how they felt. And then, how did Johnson's formulaic denial, aggregating with other tweetable slogans about education, Brexit and the NHS, play as it moved outwards through social media into homes around the country? It is because of all of these complex questions that a more expansive conceptualization of text is needed. In the next part of this article, we propose such a conceptualization, situating this in relation to our previous work which takes a sociomaterial perspective.

### **Returning to text - a sociomaterial approach**

In previous work we have developed a sociomaterial stance that is informed largely by theorists associated with what is often referred to as post actor network theory (e.g. Law & Hassard, 1999; Law & Mol, 2002; Mol, 2002), but also inflected by the nonrepresentational

theories of Massumi (2002) and Manning (2016) (see Burnett & Merchant, 2018; Burnett, Merchant & Neumann, 2019). It is with this sociomaterial approach that we return to text - and the sorts of textual traffic (Kell, 2011) described above. Consistent with Spinozan ideas about affect, our approach invokes a world that is constantly in motion, a weaving together of circumstantial relations in which human and non-human bodies, including researchers, the researched and their research instruments, all participate (Law, 2004). It is a world of ceaseless becoming, made of innumerable threads of causality rather than discreet, a priori phenomena (Thrift, 2003). This sociomaterial approach holds that realities are produced as bodies come into relation in particular ways – as we suggest above. From this perspective, people and things are accorded equal status; bodies are not seen as individual entities but only in relation to one another, holding in place - or indeed sometimes dispelling - ways of doing, being and knowing as they do so. As bodies come into relation with other bodies they affect and are affected by them - they become different and subsequently help to generate other ways of doing and being.

Importantly, and contrary to some critiques, such an account does not erase the lived experience of social, political and economic injustice, because it recognizes the obduracy of social material relations that hold inequities in place. Rather it expands our frame of reference in thinking about what plays into such relations, and also sees those relations as contingent, recognizing the possibility that they might play out in unexpected ways. This alerts us not only to the complex relationalities that hold practices in place, but also encourages us to pay attention to how things unfold, and to attend to the multiple relations that might (or might not) play out in the moment. We might think of this in terms of meaning potential – a term used by Halliday (1975) but which we use in a rather different way.

For us meaning potential shares much in common with Deleuze & Guattari's (1994) idea of the "plane of immanence". As Colebrook writes in her commentary on this, the: world or cosmos is an immanent plane of signification or "semiosis"; there are signs and codes throughout life, not just in the separate mind of man or languages. Genetic codes; an insect "reading" a plant; the stomach decomposing and "analyzing" nutrients; and a computer chewing through information and data. (Colebrook, 2002, p.107-8)

So in classroom contexts - or indeed the Houses of Parliament - we might well consider the uninvited or unnoticed living and non-living bodies that affect each other: the wires, cables, tracks and signals that connect this place to others, the dirt smeared from shoe to floor, the micro-organisms living on scalps, and so on and on (Burnett & Merchant, 2017). All of these things are replete with meaning potential. As they enter relational assemblages, meaning potential exceeds exponentially what is available for meanings to be made, just as meanings made exceed what it is possible to notice.

We find this orientation to meaning potential useful because it does not tie meaning making exclusively to human interaction, impulse or intention, and because potentiality always exceeds specific meanings that arise. Meaning, from this perspective, becomes amenable to a much richer description of relations and of how bodies might affect and be affected by one another. This is a perspective that would seem to offer much to considering the relational effects of the interplay of multiple texts, devices, algorithms and connectivity that participate in many contemporary communicative exchanges, including those in the Stella Creasy story described above. It may also be important when we think about the ways in which technologies bring other interests into the classroom (Paakkari et al., 2018). If meaning potential refers to the meaning immanent within human and non-human bodies, then the meanings made can be usefully thought of in terms of *social-material affects*. Importantly, ongoing debates in biosemiotics and animal studies explore how other living things know the world differently from humans, and hence communicate in other ways: a dog

might read a scent, a bird a branch, a horse a body, a tree the possibility of water, for example (Despret, 2004; Weil, 2010). And of course humans draw on multiple semiotic systems which have been afforded different degrees of legitimacy. Different forms of communication therefore require different readings of what happens as bodies and things come into relation. But in all of these cases, social- material arrangements can be thought of as affects. There is not space here to explore fully this diversity of “planes of expression” (Bryant, 2014, p.133), but it is important to note that the sociomaterial account of meaning making that we describe attempts at least to gesture towards the meanings that are missed by human framings, and to acknowledge the role of non-humans in meanings generated.

At this point, then, we turn to those instances of meaning making that involve text in what we refer to as *social-material-textual* affects. Importantly for our argument, we wish to underline that texts too can be thought of as bodies, and as such also affect and are affected as they come into relation with other human and non-human bodies.

### **Social-material-textual affects: four ideas about texts**

As we explored earlier, descriptions and definitions have long rested on the idea that text brings into being things that are not immediately apparent or present. It is generally understood that texts layer in a space-time connection by the use of a shared code – the contents of a digital noticeboard in a Walthamstow school, for example, can be shared almost instantly with an MP and seen in homes across the country (both in the moment and in the days that followed the initial incident). A sociomaterial perspective complicates this idea by prompting us to see texts as produced through sociomaterial affects. Our interest here is in what texts do and in what happens to texts as they circulate. We propose that approaching texts through the analysis of social-material-textual affects foregrounds four related ideas about text: linked to what they mean, what they do, and what they become (or not).

Our first idea is that texts are entangled in heterogeneous sociomaterial assemblings and this is significant for what they come to mean - texts therefore do not mean in and of themselves. As explored earlier this is certainly not a new idea. However, our sociomaterial approach brings a particular slant to the notion that meanings are unstable, adding material and other participants into the negotiation of meaning. We might note for example, the atmosphere of the House of Commons, the sounds, smells, temperature and ambient sound, the continual movement. The story of the digital noticeboard is momentarily re-made as it is replayed in *that* place, at *that* moment, by *those* MPs and remade again as it travels via mainstream media or via Twitter into people’s lives. Things unfold as they do partly because of habitual ways of being and doing at Prime Minister’s Questions, but folded into this very familiarity is also the possibility of departing from expected norms. Creasy’s question gains particular traction because the Prime Minister is so apparently evasive in his response, and disappears as quickly as the exchanges continue and, by all account, become ever more aggressive. Texts then, do not just mediate activity - but affect and are affected by it, in diverse and often unpredictable or unintended ways in complex interweaving sets of relations (none of which Anomoly could ever have predicted).

Our second idea is that these dynamic assemblings are significant for what texts do. A digital noticeboard in a primary school, for example, briefly becomes a focus for political exchange as a parent photographs it and forwards it to a politician. As it arrives in the House of Commons it becomes the focus of Creasy’s question at a time of political tension, weaponized perhaps but then rapidly decommissioned as the challenge fails to gather momentum as other concerns and other challenges erased it from the debate. On another night when perhaps less was at stake, it may perhaps have done more - generated public outcry for example about the increased marketization of state education and the work of unsanctioned texts in the life of schools. In some locations - in the staffroom or parents’

association at the Walthamstow school for instance - perhaps it did. 'Doing' therefore may be multiple, related to both intentional and unintentional action, and doings are generated as people and things assemble in different ways. Again this is not a new idea. In an educational context, for example, we might note how texts work to determine the age of admission to school, the safety requirements of school buildings, the length of the school day, or the conditions under which other texts (such as tests) should be presented. But our sociomaterial perspective helps to explain why sometimes texts can have unintended consequences. While texts can work to hold certain practices in place, they can also do unexpected things in different places and on different occasions as various social-material-textual affects assemble.

At the time of writing for example, it is hard to trace the origins of the appearance of the Anomaly text in schools. Anomaly have taken down their website, stating that this is in response to abuse they have received. But they have stated that the post had been part of a larger sequence on British Politicians and was there as part of their contract to produce content linked to British Values (a requirement for schools in England, which itself raises questions about the nature of such Values and what they might come to mean in schools). Its movement from Anomaly, through to Creasy to parliament and out again resonates with Kell's (2011, p.607) description of the traffic of texts, seen as the chaining of events in which literacy enables the movement of meaning 'threading its way through lives, places and times' as it affects and is affected by different bodies – the human and the nonhuman, people and things. Texts and their meanings, always plural, are key to this but they do not act alone. To think of texts as bodies (in the Deleuzian sense) is to think of how they affect and are affected by the full range of human and non-human entities and atmospheres in which they are embedded and in turn help to produce. So although texts bring with them particular ways of being and doing, there is always the possibility that these will be resisted or re-purposed through different social-material-textual affects.

Our third idea uses our concept of social-material-textual affects to highlight how texts are produced *as texts* through sociomaterial relations. This perspective suggests that texts are not just fluid in their meanings, but there is also fluidity in whether (and if so, how) they materialize as *texts*. As well as highlighting how texts come to mean (in the sense of what they might convey), a sociomaterial perspective also invites consideration of how it is that sometimes things get produced *as* texts, as well as the *kinds* of texts they become. In our example, we might imagine a parent waiting in the school entrance at the school day, her eyes wandering around the walls. She might have noticed photos of the school staff, notices about vaccinations, posters on reading with your child 'for enjoyment', an up-and coming Autumn fayre, and perhaps Autumn poetry double mounted over silhouettes of Autumn leaves - or any of the other notices that are typically found in entrance halls across primary schools in the UK. The digital noticeboard (which perhaps was in this entrance hall, although we cannot be sure) may have caught her eye as it seemed a little out of place. Perhaps she was drawn in by contents that jarred with her expectations of these surroundings - Brexit propaganda in a state primary school? Really?? The noticeboard becomes text when it is read as such, just as a tweet lives as text for as long as it is noticed, liked, retweeted, or picked up on through other media. Moreover, one kind of text becomes another (a notice becomes tweet, information becomes propaganda, Prime Minister's Questions becomes video) as parent, school, MPs and parliament assemble together in a moment. Our sociomaterial perspective therefore highlights how texts are produced *as texts* or, more precisely, how particular social-material-textual arrangements become salient as opposed to other relational encounters.

Linked to this, our fourth idea is that sometimes texts do not materialize and other kinds of relational encounters come to the fore– they become, in effect, not-texts. As we have explored elsewhere, for example, we might distinguish between moments when an iPad in a

classroom becomes a sledge or tray and moments when it becomes a text, or between moments when a child chooses to chew a pencil and moments when they trace it over a surface to make a mark on paper (Burnett, 2017; Burnett, Neumann & Merchant, 2019). In these cases, we might argue that meanings are being made as people and objects come into relation, but there are only some in which meaning making involves text. Returning to our example, it may well be that the digital noticeboard was ignored by many of those that passed it, just wallpaper in effect like so many other displays - digital or otherwise - that you find in schools. The key point here though, is that things only become text when social-material relations align in particular ways; they only become text *in relation*, being a specific kind of social-material-semiotic configuration. This exemplifies the surfeit of meaning or potentiality which is nascent within social-material-semiotic arrangements in any moment, and the ways in which activity can therefore unfold in unexpected ways. As such, it also serves perhaps as a reminder of how powerful literacies can be disrupted.

These four ideas, of course, with their differing emphasis on meaning, doing and being are of course inextricably related. Together however they provide different orientations to the *instability* of texts: both the instability of the meanings mediated by text, and the ways in which text may materialize or not, in relation with other people and things. These ideas, as we explore below, have particular relevance in the context of contemporary meaning making practices.

## Conclusion

In this article we have argued that a sociomaterial take on affect can not only enrich theorizations of literacy, but also the theorization of text. Earlier we explored how extant research on literacy and affect presents text as a participant in relational ensembles, and foregrounds meaning making as ‘more than text’. In this article we have argued that texts do not just participate in relational assemblages but are produced through them, drawing attention to the ways that texts are ephemeral and that, as they emerge, they too are always *more than* what they seem to be. This sociomaterial perspective works to dissolve the separation of human and non-human, and of culture and nature, that we noted in the introduction. However, it leaves us with a sense of the importance of text, highlighting four inter-related ideas:

1. texts are relational – they act on, and affect people and other things and as such their meanings shift: i.e. texts are entangled with dynamic, heterogeneous sociomaterial assemblings;
2. textual meanings are unstable, i.e. these dynamic assemblings are significant for what texts do – they sometimes sustain and sometimes shift;
3. texts are ephemeral: a focus on social-material-textual affects highlights how texts are produced as texts through sociomaterial relations;
4. texts are mutable – just as there are moments when things become text, they can become different things in different times/spaces: sometimes texts do not materialize as other kinds of relational encounters come to the fore.

For literacy researchers this discussion raises questions about what texts do (as conceived as operating across distributed, relational assemblages), and about the point at which they become active as semiotic objects. It also raises questions about what reading and writing become within shifting social-material-textual configurations and, indeed, what reading and writing do.

Such ideas are important because they articulate specific dimensions of the relationship between literacy and affect, because they provide critical purchase for considering what texts do, and because they provide new ways of considering how certain kinds of literacies are held in place, and how others might emerge. However they are not just important in

providing new orientations to familiar practices. They are also important in providing a means of articulating the less familiar movements and manifestations of digital media. This reorientation is important at a time when, as discussed above, ideas about text and about the qualities of social-material-textual arrangements may need to be re-thought in the light of what Hansen (2015) refers to as ‘twenty-first-century-media’, at a time when what texts do may be quite different from what they have done in the past. In educational contexts, this sociomaterial conceptualization is relevant to discussions about how political and commercial motivations play through the production of text in complex ways and the implications of this for how we approach reading and writing in educational contexts (Nichols & Stornaiuolo, 2019). It provides critical purchase on what happens as commercial services (like Anomaly) supply educational technology that pushes content into classrooms, when collaborative digital textbooks govern learning (Grönlund, Wiklund, M & Böö, 2018) and as students’ digital devices bring new commercial interests to bear upon the business of education. Our central point however is that a sociomaterial conceptualization highlights the multiple effects generated as texts (or indeed not-texts) are materialised, mediated, and shaped.

If as argued above, *textual meanings are unstable*, we might examine how the meanings generated through what we do online and onscreen get made and remade as they move across media. It is relatively straightforward to imagine the series of movements that led to an attenuated discussion of the digital noticeboard in the House of Commons, even if this series of movements happened across scales of time and space - the installation of the board, the design of content, the posting of such on that day, and the photograph (by a parent) which extracted it from its context and sent it to Stella Creasy where it took on new political weight in the House of Commons. Other movements, however, are less easy to detect. For example, Jones (2015 p.43) shows how self-tracking health apps translate realtime bodily movement, and food and liquid intake into biomedical information which is passed on to third parties without permission. In other words, like other digital texts, fitness apps can change human behaviour. In extending this argument Jones underlines the point that “web surfers, online shoppers, gamers and social media users continually modify their actions based on the feedback provided by the algorithms underlying these texts” (p.45). If, as has been explored elsewhere, technologies have become non-prosthetic, they do not just act for or instead of us, but act in ways that exceed what we intend or are aware of, often in timeframes that we cannot perceive (Hansen, 2015). What appears on screen is both more ephemeral and more durable: lost in a morass of other online activity but also to all intents and purposes indelible. Our sociomaterial take on affect and text provides a way of accounting for this permeability, not least because it offers us an account of affect that includes machine-machine relations, and one that is not exclusively rooted in embodied human subjects.

It has been beyond the scope of this article to fully explore the implications of affect for thinking about new media practices or indeed their implications for literacy education, but this is an important area for future research. There is a need to know more, not just about how technical specifications can generate certain results, but how these may mutate or distort along the way, perhaps throwing up unexpected possibilities as they come into dialogue with other algorithms, and also with other people, places and things. Part of this is technical knowledge, the kind of data literacy that can be nurtured through teaching the skills of computing. But, as others have argued (e.g. de Freitas, 2018), these are not purely technical issues, and there is a continuing interest in the contribution that social scientists can make to understanding the increasingly entangled relations between humans and machines (e.g. Svennson, 2016). Our argument is that literacy researchers have an important role to play in this regard. Of central interest here is the textuality of on-screen activity, a textuality that carries meaning across space and time and that generates new meanings as algorithms enter dialogue with each other. As our argument explores, it is a textuality that can be understood

as affect – as texts are produced they both affect and are affected within social-material-textual arrangements.

This sociomaterial approach, and the four ideas about text generated, offer support in articulating how things are produced as texts in sociomaterial arrangements, and in how the meanings generated exceed meanings intended. We suggest that these conceptual tools provide critical purchase for considering affects produced through familiar literacy practices, but also through the less familiar and increasingly pervasive new media practices that play through our lives, at a time when distinctions between author, text, reader and technology can seem to blur in ways that may be bewildering or disenfranchising. But even though texts are relational, unstable and ephemeral and even though their meanings are mutable, always highly dependent on the affective flows, what they do and what they come to signify is crucial. This is what makes content on a digital noticeboard *significant*, and why a political leader's response to this comes to matter. Affect is not in some way opposed to signification - affect and signification are interwoven. It is important to hold on to this in the new economy of textual politics. After all this is a communication economy in which a presidential tweet matters, in which online hate speech can take hold, and through which non-humans write texts that conspire to construct our present and predict our future. By recording, regulating and relaying messages across space and time literacy is always an instrument of power. In a densely-mediated world human intentions are fragile, caught up in complex human/non-human entanglements, but this does not imply that texts have somehow lost their meaning. Instead it suggests that we need literacy more than ever before in order to understand how texts come to matter, how meanings are held in place, how those same meanings can dissipate and how new meanings takes shape.

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