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Scenarios

Overview: The Study

For the most part, this book offers an account of selected text-makers and their texts in a small university building. Seven individuals have been singled out for detailed study in an attempt to increase our understanding of what it means to say that academic writing is “situated.” On the one hand, I examine how that writing is located within and along the evolution of a particular career; on the other, I try to place these various bodies of text both within a particular set of disciplinary norms and expectations, and within the local, institutional context of their production. For this last, I have also studied certain kinds of “routine writing business” that take place on each floor of the building, and have in turn situated those everyday activities within their historical and spatial settings. This, then, is a site study of particularity and communality as seen through the lens of written discourse.

The label given to the volume is *textography*, by which I mean something more than a disembodied textual or discursal analysis, but something less than a full ethnographic account. Although anthropologist John Van Maanen can observe “that a text is axiomatically an ethnography if it is put forth by its author as a nonfiction work intended to represent, interpret, or (perhaps best) translate a culture or selected aspects

of a culture” (1995, pp. 13–14), *ethnography* is not a label I am comfortable with. For one thing, I am a discourse analyst and an applied linguist, not a cultural anthropologist or a sociologist with an orientation toward fieldwork. For another, the term itself has become a conflicted and controversial one. Here is Van Maanen again: “Ethnography is no longer pictured as a relatively simple look, listen and learn procedure but, rather, as something akin to an intense epistemological trial by fire” (1995, p. 2). Thirdly, *Other Floors, Other Voices* is a deliberately circumscribed investigation, as it focuses more on particular individuals within the building than on its entire collectivities, and builds its arguments through a close analysis of individual *textual* extracts. “Textography” would thus seem a suitable term for the enterprise.

There are, of course, many ways of approaching academic, scholarly, or professional writing, some of which are reviewed in greater detail in the closing chapter. There have been studies of a particular *discipline*, such as Economics; investigations into a particular type of text or *genre*, such as the research article; inquiries into the ways *experts* read and write texts in their chosen specialties; other studies of how graduate student *apprentices* become acculturated and socialized into their disciplinary communities; explorations of the writing of famous *individuals*, such as Charles Darwin; approaches that are variously historical, rhetorical, sociological, literary, or linguistic; and the list goes on. A site-based textographic study is a simple addition to this long list, not a substitution for some part of it. In effect, textography’s distinctive type of context offers some additional, alternative perspective. For example, I hope to be able to show that a textographic account can indeed provide new insight into the relationships between particularity and communality, between “service” and “scholarly” activities, and between prior and present texts. The nature of the enterprise has also produced a number of “discoveries” about genres that suggest some redrawing of the traditional and conventional rhetorical maps we have for the academy. Further, the quiddities of textual life on each of the site’s three floors point to wildly different temporal horizons of expectation, ranging from “just in time” trouble-shooting texts in one location to a 17-volume project in another that began almost five decades ago and will likely continue for a further three. Finally, the study has elicited some empirical, if complex, evidence

for the validation (or otherwise) of the powerful but troubled concept of *discourse community* (discussed further in the fourth section of this opening chapter).

Overview: The Site

The building itself is undistinguished and sits surrounded on three sides by a parking lot, which in turn is flanked by the busy business loop of I-94 as it makes its way through the small city of Ann Arbor in the American Midwest. As many readers may already have guessed, the building belongs to the University of Michigan, a large and well-known educational institution and one where I happen to work as a teacher of linguistics and of English as a second language.

The name commonly given to the edifice is as plain as its appearance: *The North University Building*. Indeed, if there is anything distinctive about NUBS (as it is usually abbreviated), it must apparently be sought in the unusual mixture of its occupants. There is, to all intents and purposes, one small unit (with not more than 20 regular members) on each of the three floors of the main block—the principal focus for this study. On the first floor is the Computing Resource Site (CRS), one of several computing and computing-assistance sites run by the university's centralized Information Technology Division. The second floor houses the University Herbarium, an independent unit of Literature, Science, and Arts (LSA), the university's liberal arts college, which looks after and fosters the university's extensive collections of dried vascular plants, fungi, mosses, lichens, and algae, and carries out research in Systematic Botany. Its curators also identify specimens, usually for professionals, but also for the general public, as in: "Is this a native plant, and what is its name?" or "Can I eat this mushroom?" or even "Is my neighbor growing marijuana?" Above the Herbarium is the English Language Institute (ELI), which is also an independent unit in LSA. The Institute is the university unit responsible for helping those international students (and staff) on the Ann Arbor campus who need or want assistance with their English. In addition, it runs a worldwide English language testing operation (colloquially known as "The Michigan Tests") and conducts research into academic discourse and other areas of applied linguistics relevant to its mission. I have an office in the ELI.

None of the building's three units is a typical academic unit, such as a Department or Program. None, for example, offers a degree of any kind—and, as we have seen, all three are involved with services. Further, the three floors all seem to represent “settled” communities, at least in the sense that each brings professional expertise to the circumscribed tasks it undertakes, and does so within a local consensus of what those tasks should be and how they should be implemented in an efficient and timely manner.

But, as we might expect, despite their proximity and their common service roles, the three units in this study are markedly different. Obviously, they offer very different kinds of expertise, but they differ in important other ways too. Today computer technology is the world's major growth industry. In comparison to this giant, English as a second language (ESL) is small, but it still has a sizeable international commercial role developed in recent decades to meet increasing worldwide demand by non-native speakers of English for help with improving their English proficiency. In part response to this upsurge in demand, ESL has relatively strong research and development traditions, certainly in comparison to the teaching of other foreign languages. The U.S. national association, the Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (or TESOL) has currently close to 25,000 subscribing members. Even when compared to ESL, Systematic Botany is small-scale (with only about 1,200 members in its U.S. national association) and, especially in the New World below the U.S.–Mexican border, engaged in a desperate struggle to inventory species before they disappear.

On the other side of the ledger, Botany is one of the most ancient of sciences and has very long time-lines, as attested by the fact that the curators in the Herbarium can often be found consulting texts published several decades previously. In contrast, the viability and currency of texts in ESL rarely extend beyond 10 years, and in Computer Technology active shelf-life may be 10 months (if that). A final twist to these disparities derives from the particular demographics of the North University Building during the period of the study (1994–1996). The nonclerical staff in the Herbarium were mostly men in their 50s, 60s, and 70s; in the ELI mostly women in their 40s; and in the CRS mostly men in their 20s or early 30s. Given all these differences, the scene seems set for an engaging comparative study.

That study begins with a brief look at the history and geography of the building, followed—later in this chapter—by informal accounts of why I believe the site can make a distinctive contribution to contemporary rhetorical theory, and how I went about the task of investigating the building's discursual practices. Chapter 2 then focuses on certain types of routine business that take place on each floor. In some contrast, the following two chapters delve into the scholarly heart of the building, first by examining the textual biographies of four curators (three of whom are also professors) in the Herbarium, and then of a lecturer and two professors in the ELI. In the final chapter, I return to review the more general theoretical and methodological issues briefly mentioned at the outset, and I briefly discuss pedagogical and other implications.

Then and Now: A Short History of the Building

The attempts by my research assistant, Margaret Luebs, to trace the history of the building had its own surprises in store for us. What we did not know at the outset was that the many and diverse publications about the University of Michigan had very little to say about the building, in marked contrast to the descriptions and analyses of many of the grander edifices on campus. Historical information about the building was largely hidden away in manuscripts and administrative files contained in the archives of the university's Bentley Historical Library. One likely reason for this "benign neglect" was that NUBS was originally designed and built for—and by—the lowly Building and Grounds Department in 1922, which occupied it until the present units began moving into the now-vacated space during the late 1950s.

Moreover, the university's Campus News and Information Services unit has many thousands of university photographs and slides in its archives, all from after 1974 (earlier ones are in the Bentley). However, a search did not reveal any of the North University Building, and Robert Kalmbach, in a 40-year career as the unit's main photographer, did not recollect ever having taken one. The North University Building was never a jewel in any architect's crown, nor the kind of building that the university would ever be likely to use in its publicity and informational materials.

We did quickly discover *why* it was called the North University Building—because it was originally on North University Street. Today, however, *North University* has been diverted to make way for a footbridge over Business I-94, and goes not within 100 yards of the building. Even more curiously, the building still retains its original but now phantom street address of 1205 *North University*, because Federal Express requires a street location for delivery. Even so, this address is known only to a few old hands and long-serving secretaries. And if you are beginning to think this is turning into a gothic tale, there is more. Confusion exists about the very name of the building itself. If one cares to look at the addresses of the three units in the university phone book, one will note that the ELI describes its location as “NUB” (North University Building), the Herbarium as “NU” (North University), and the Computing Resource Site as “NUBS” (North University Building Station), although the original reading of “NUBS” from its Buildings and Grounds days was “North University Building Services,” and one in fact that can still be heard. With regard to the CRS name, here is an extract from an undated memo (but undoubtedly from the 1970s) by the first director of the university’s Computing Center, R.C.F. Bartels, a professor of Mathematics:

At first, the Computing Center was housed in the North University Building, a location now known as NUBS, the North University Building Station. After the Computing Center moved to its present location on North Campus in 1971, NUBS was the first of several branch stations to be established. The others are at the Flint and Dearborn campuses, the School of Business Administration, and a small station at the Undergraduate Library.

In general, all this terminological confusion suggests that we are indeed looking at, from this minor perspective, “other floors, other voices.” More specifically, it points to a certain arrogance on the Computing Center’s part—as the big brother—to attempt to redesignate the whole building in terms of its *own* functions. And, as we have seen, this has been a move tacitly resisted by the Herbarium and the ELI as reflected by their alternative readings of their university addresses.

One of the few published accounts of the building complex with which we are concerned is the following brief note in *A Guide to the Campus of the University of Michigan*:

In 1914 the Department of Building and Grounds served as architect and contractor for the construction of a storehouse and shop building to provide offices for the superintendent, maintenance and construction materials, and space for janitor and hospital supplies. Railroad tracks fed into the building and it is said that at one time part of the building was used as a stable for the horses that pulled snowplows. (MacInnes & Stevens, 1978, p. 44)

This two-story 1914 structure is not, in fact, the part of NUBS that is the focus of this study, although part of its second floor does house the specimen cabinets of the Herbarium's collections. Even so, Margaret was able to confirm the rumor in the extract's last line by tracking down a photocopy of a grainy 1924 newspaper photograph (Photo 1) of the workhorses. In the background, we can see the three-story building that is the site of this study and, as a 1994 shot shows (Photo 2), it has remained virtually unchanged except for the addition of air-conditioning ductwork.

According to Donnelly, Shaw, and Gjelsness' *The University of Michigan—An Encyclopedic Survey* (1958), this building was constructed in 1922. This "addition," constructed yet again by the Buildings and Grounds Department at a cost of \$120,000 and again for its own use, was designed as a Storehouse and as a location for the university's "Shops": carpentry, metal-working, plumbing, electrical, and so on. One consequence is that the building is very massively built, doubtless to carry the weight of heavy materials such as building supplies and heavy machinery. Given NUBS' utilitarian purpose and journeyman architecture, it is not altogether surprising that the building has failed to attract the attention of the university's historians and archivists. It is, however, a little surprising that the building is not mentioned by George Lutz in his 1935 manuscript entitled *Data on Campus Development and Reminiscences*, inasmuch as Mr. Lutz, who worked at the university from 1888 until the late 1930s, was for many years foreman of the painting shop and, in

consequence, almost certainly had an office in NUBS. Margaret, in fact, was able to find only one rather dark and gloomy—and undated—photograph of the building in the Bentley Library (Photo 3); the rather sunnier one (Photo 4) taken in 1994, and from a different angle, confirms that the front of the building has also changed very little in its exterior appearance throughout the 75 years or so of its existence.

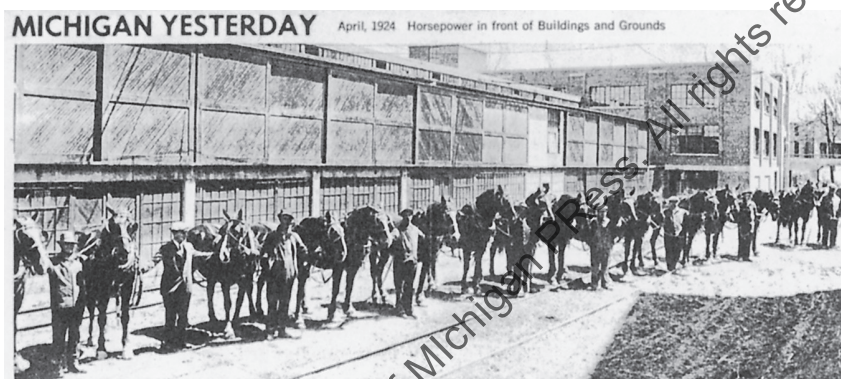


Photo 1. The building in 1924.



Photo 2. The building in 1994.

Apart from occasional small items in *The B and G News* (1925–1927), we have only been able to trace one published account of activities in the building conducted by its original occupiers. Following is an extract from *The Alumnus* headed “Activities at the Storehouse”:

In the course of a year this organization handles packages from every corner of the known world, and materials of all characters. Snakes intended for the Museum may arrive one day; the Storehouse people still remember chasing one shipment; another day it may be botanical specimens from Sumatra. Between 135 and 150 different accounts with various departments have to be kept, not to speak of about 500 maintenance and construction accounts. For the six months ending January 1, 1930, the Storehouse purchased \$333,000 worth of material and sold \$350,000. In its heaviest year, when the building program was at its height, the record was \$1,135,000 of purchases and \$1,152,000 sales. This was in 1924.

To handle this large income and outgo the University in 1922 built a modern fire proof three-story building, which also houses the Buildings and Grounds Department, its offices and shops. There are 23 employees to look after the stores. (*The Alumnus*, 1930, p. 364)

The Buildings and Grounds Department (after 1946 the Plant Department) occupied the building until the mid-1950s, when the department's increasing size finally forced it to relocate to a new, much larger building complex, farther from the central campus area. Soon after the move, Plant Department employees returned to their former workplace to remodel the building for its new tenants. The new tenants were, as we know, the Computing Center, the Herbarium, and the ELI. Of these, only the Computing Center began at NUBS, having been created by Regental Decree in 1959. As Bruce W. Arden reported in 1963 in *The Michigan Technic*, “In 1959 the IBM 704 computer was installed in the North University Building as part of the IBM educational program, and the facility was established as a separate unit of the Graduate School” (p. 46). The other two units had been in existence elsewhere on campus

for some time. Indeed, the university is believed to have begun assembling collections of plant specimens as far back as 1838, a year after its move from Detroit to its present Ann Arbor main campus. The English Language Institute was in comparison a relative newcomer, having been founded in 1941, but even then it was the first institute of its type in North America.



Photo 3. Undated photo of the main building.



Photo 4. 1994 photo of the main entrance.

By the end of the 1950s, the Herbarium had outgrown its allotted space in the restricted areas of the Natural History Museum. The ELI also needed to expand and consolidate its operations as the first large wave of international students began to invade U.S. campuses (see Chapter 2). Up until that time, its activities had been split between two locations: the Graduate School building and one of the humanities buildings. Particularly extensive renovation was required before the newly created Computer Center could move into the first floor of NUBS, including, according to old-timers, the removal of horse manure from the sub-basement (Mike Alexander, in a 1995 interview). Further, the break-neck speed of computer advance required continual remodeling work over the subsequent decade. Consider, for instance, this extract from a rather frenetic Plant Department Work Order dated September 12, 1966:

Work to be done

Install a [*sic*] temporary floor to ceiling (rough) plywood or composition walls in order to partition Room 1101 of North University Building as shown on the attached sketch. This will involve the installation of two doors.

....

This work is intended to provide temporary quarters for the Computing Center. It will be torn down again in about four months.

Eventually, additional modifications became virtually impossible, and in 1971 many of the technical/research staff and the big computer moved out to a specially constructed building on the new Engineering campus, leaving behind a smaller mainframe computer and a few operators to run it. This was the beginning of the current NUBS Computing Resource Site (CRS).

Internally, the three floors today look rather different. As might be expected, the CRS is definitely modern with its recessed lighting, gleaming computers, beige carpeting (Photo 5), and blond shelving for completed large printing jobs (Photo 6). In contrast, much of the