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Peirce,  
Signs,  
and Meaning

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# Introduction

## Exordium

So I guess I had to embark on another book, which you now have in your hands. It all began almost a decade ago when I sifted through a pile of notes and wrote *Signs Becoming Signs: Our Perfusive, Pervasive Universe* (1991), which celebrated Charles S. Peirce's *processual semiotics*. Then, focus on *signs amongst signs*, that is, signs now actualized and offering themselves up to their interpreters – who are, themselves, so many signs – culminated in another book, *Semiosis in the Postmodern Age* (1995a). Finally, the general concept of signs growing, developing, evolving motivated the third volume of a rather self-indulgent trilogy: *Signs Grow: Semiosis and Life Processes* (1996). Following this meagre contribution to academic vainglory, why should I attempt – or even want, for that matter – to proceed?

Well, there remained this matter of the uncertain, vacillating *scandal of meaning*. I write 'scandal,' for throughout the ages meditation, speculation, deliberation, and debate on the nature of meaning has left the door open to opprobrium, ignominy, and unending frustration (the phrase 'scandal of meaning' also comes from a special session at the Charles Sanders Peirce Sesquicentennial Congress, Harvard University, 1989, where it was repeated on several occasions). The concept of meaning has been almost exclusively limited to the use of human language by human beings. This has more often than not culminated in unabashed 'linguicism' (which includes 'logocentricism'), with little regard for nonlinguistic semiotic modes. The fact of the matter is that meaning cannot live by language alone. Language, of course, is most comfortable in its familiar playpen and surrounded by an abundance of speakers with which to entertain itself. Yet it provides no guarantees regarding meaning: the reports of mystics, poets, rhetoricians, scientists, and our everyday stuttering and stammering bear

witness to its notorious limitations. Neither is meaning available exclusively by way of the concepts of extension, denotation, reference, correspondence, and representation. That hopeful dream was put to rest some time ago, though many scholars are still hanging around to witness the last gasps of the senile world picture. It seemed to me that if any form or fashion of meaning is accessible to our finite, fallible intellectual faculties at all, surely it must incorporate the whole of Peirce's concept of the sign, which attempted to take on the indefinitely vast nonlinguistic sphere of *semiosis*. The idea began to captivate me. So eventually I had to go on, knowing full well that once again there would be no royal epistemological road to that venerable endgame, 'truth,' but hardly more than some vague, infinitely diverging, converging, set of cerebral goat trails lining precarious canyon walls enshrouded in an obstinate mist.

There were, to be sure, lingering doubts, sneaky feelings of inadequacy for the task ahead – after all, given my academic preparation I wasn't supposed to be meddling in this sort of thing – a sense of being tossed about in a sea of ambiguity, the lingering premonition that it would all come to naught. Of course, the very idea of meaning is presumptuous in the first place. Any and all attempts to wrap it up in a tidy package are in all likelihood predestined to end in 'scandal' of one form or another. For one's belief that one will be capable of coming to grips with meaning must surely be the greatest pretension of them all. But much the same could be said of the West's age-old quest for such imponderables as knowledge, 'truth,' and, above all, foundations regarding our most cherished foci of interest. To discover the ultimate building blocks of nature, to know the outer reaches of the universe, to give counsel regarding moral standards, to determine and define cultural values, to provide the ultimate criteria for excellence in art, to talk with God or with children or with the animals with the claim of understanding them: how supercilious all! Yet the rebuttal has it that to cease these predilections, queries, and impositions would be virtually to cease being human.

So yes, meaning. I suppose. Well anyway, why not?

### **Preliminaries**

As things turned out, I expect the pages that follow will not strike you as just another volume on meaning. They begin on a tangential, yet nonlinear note. This is, I would submit, a reasonably poetic step, for Charles S. Peirce, whose thought influences this book, leaves few well-hewn paths with clear, distinct, and unambiguous slashes on nearby trees to mark the way. Quite the contrary. He intimates, suggests, implies, teases, and cajoles, but he also

surprises, pushes, jolts, and at times insults. Consequently, how is it possible to present a neo-Peircean semiotic view of meaning in anything but a roundabout way? What can be said without vacillating allusions? Where can any solid anchor point be found, if one knows not from whence one came or whereto one should proceed?

Indeed, nowhere is semiotic indeterminacy more evident than on the question of meaning. In fact, the overriding theme of this inquiry will be that *indeterminacy*, at the heart of the *vagueness* and *generality*, the *inconsistency* and *incompleteness*, and the *overdetermination* and *underdetermination* of any and all signs, is no less than the fulcrum point of the life of signs and hence of their meaning (I cannot overemphasize the importance of the italicized terms to the thesis to be presented in this inquiry, as should become quite evident). But it is by nature a sliding fulcrum point. Consequently, the concept of meaning eludes one at the very moment it seems to be within one's grasp. Yet, signs and their meanings are inseparable, for signs would not be signs in the full-blown sense if devoid of meaning. So to the question 'Where is meaning?' the answer is 'Not in the confines of the skull, in the sign itself, in the thing to which it presumably refers, or somewhere in the imaginary – though illusory – conduit, that invisible conduit tube between sign emitter and sign receiver.' Meaning is nowhere and at the same time it is everywhere; it is in the interrelations of the sign interaction incessantly being played out on the stage of *semiosis*. Meaning is largely an informal, virtually unspecifiable and untheorizable, commodity.

Nonetheless, theories of meaning have abounded during the present century, with obsessive focus on language that has given rise to the likes of logical positivism, analytical philosophy, speech-act theory, hermeneutics, phenomenology, semiology, structuralism and poststructuralism, generative semantics, pragmatics, narratology, discourse analysis, and other 'linguicentric' practices, including even deconstruction. Many problems and questionable practices remain, however. Some scholars have a propensity to conflate words and their meanings, subjects and language, texts and authors and readers, and texts and the world. Others divorce language from their users and the world, as if contexts and thinking and feeling speakers did not exist. Still others pluck sentences out of common usage, or they invent perversely simple to highly improbable statements in order to test them in the mental laboratory of abstract theories. In the final analysis all these theorists are more often than not puppeteers holding on their strings not even so much as wooden speakers and hearers, or writers and readers, but nothing more than imaginary words, sentences, texts, narrative, discourse, and quite a lot of hot air. (The problem in this regard has been in large part due to the fact that much contemporary linguistic theory and philosophy has emerged from mathematical logic and

metamathematics. This influence of formal logic on linguistic theory has been paralleled by the adoption of a linguistic account in metamathematical practices [see Stenlund 1990, for a critique of these practices]. It has frequently resulted in the concept of language as a calculus or formal system comparable to the systems of formal logic. Consequently, the rules, derived for mathematical logic and determining the technical use of words such as ‘language,’ ‘proposition,’ ‘reference,’ ‘correspondence,’ ‘representation,’ and ‘interpretation,’ and originally adapted to the description of formal systems, have been mistakenly appropriated for the study of ordinary language use. In the final chapters of this inquiry, it may appear that I too am guilty of this sin. My exoneration may be found, however, in my taking the entire range of signs into account, not strictly language.)

In spite of the many incursions into the depths of signs, their meanings have remained elusive. Meaning flows along within the *semiotic* process, resisting any and all artificial pigeon-holes. It is, as a result of this flow, plurality rather than singularity; it is many not one, continuous not discrete. Meaning does not emerge through some specifiable contact between people and people and between people and language and language and the world, but rather, it is the very process of emergence, the emergence of everything that *is* in the world, *our* ‘semiotic world.’ If we try to specify meaning in precise terms we are playing a tail-chasing-dog game inevitably ending in frustration. If we try to focus on it for the sake of analysis, the very focal point becomes that which we are in the process of producing. If we play a sort of quietist role of waiting for it to come to us, what we thought was its appearance in pristine form turns out to be our own reflection. The problem is that we would like to look for meaning as if it were an object coexisting with the sign, or as if it were in the sign itself, but once we become aware of it within the *semiotic* process, it has already passed on along the stream to become another sign. Signs, ultimately, speak for themselves. In a certain sense, they are their own meanings. Signs and the meanings that emerge from their interrelated, interactive dance are a shimmering mirage that refracts and takes on a new countenance at the mere suggestion of our futile, furtive glance. We cannot help but play hide-and-seek with ourselves in our relentless pursuit of the elusive meaning of our signs. (I should reveal at this juncture that I do not buy into the idea, common to many students of ‘postmodernism,’ that in our times we are experiencing a devastating loss of meaning, a notion especially prevalent in the writings of Jean Baudrillard [1981, 1983a, 1983b; also Kellner 1989:118, Pefanis 1991:11; for further in this regard, Merrell 1991a].)

Consequently, as is by now quite obvious, I remain critical of most formal and programmatic theories of meaning. I would say of meaning what Hilary

Putnam (1983b:xvii) says of ‘truth.’ It is ‘as vague, interest relative, and context sensitive as *we* are.’ And, as I shall argue throughout the pages that follow, we cannot help but fall victim to *vagueness* in our tireless quest for *generality*, and our *vagueness* will manifest an inevitable tinge of *inconsistency*, just as our *generalities* will always remain *incomplete*. In this regard, Peirce’s semiotics can be alternatively regarded ‘as a theory of meaning or signification, as a theory of communication, as a theory of inference and implication, as a theory of mind, or as a theory of knowledge and truth. (The list is not exhaustive.) It can be regarded in all these ways not because it is ambiguous, or because Peirce confusedly failed to distinguish these concerns, but because he adopted a point of view and forged out a system of concepts within which all of these concerns find a common basis of expression and articulation’ (Ransdell 1979:51). In the most general sense, Peirce’s semiotics by its very nature *includes* a theory of meaning. But semiotics is not about meaning in the ordinary way of taking it. It is about meaning engendered when signs are in their act of becoming signs, a becoming that includes sign interpreters as participating agents in the very *semiotic* process of becoming. I cannot overemphasize my contention that meaning is not in the signs, the things, or the head; it is in the processual rush of *semiosis*; it is always already on the go toward somewhere and somewhen. At least that is what I shall attempt to illustrate as the pages of this book pass from right to left.

But enough. There’s really nothing more I can say before I get down to the task of trying to say what I hope I have to say. Before I do that, however, I should write a few words on the Preamble and the fifteen chapters that make up this volume.

### The Layout

In the Preamble, I wish to set the tone for what is to follow with allusions to each of the diversity of topics herein discussed. I do this in the form of a dialogue between three characters, Alpha, Omega, and the Master. It is my expectation that this brief preview may whet the appetite for the main course, and at the same time afford a broad overview of the general theme to be discussed within the covers of this book. The focus of that general theme is above all, to put it bluntly, Peirce. Over the years I have come to an awareness of the importance of Peirce’s philosophy and of his concept of the sign. I believe his thought quite effectively addresses itself to many contemporary issues – this I also attempted to present in *Semiosis in the Postmodern Age*. Consequently, though during a reading of this book at times pages may come and go without specific references to Peirce, he is always lurking in the background, awaiting

his moment to recenter the scene and join in the dialogic ensemble voicing overtures bordering on and often entering the hazy arena of meaning.

In chapters 1 and 2 I attempt to paint the essential background for a Peircean discussion of meaning, which includes his concept of triadicity, self-other relationships, our rampant Faustian notion of individualism, and above all, the necessary distinction between ‘real objects’ and merely ‘semiotically real objects’ and the relations between signs and their/our ‘semiotically real worlds.’ This move calls for an initial presentation of the concepts, destined to become *leitmotifs*, of *vagueness* and *generality*, *inconsistency* and *incompleteness*, and *overdetermination* and *underdetermination*, all of which, I believe, are necessary to the very idea of ‘semiotic meaning.’ Chapter 3 argues that meaning cannot be divorced from notions of storytelling and fictionality. The engenderment of meaning in this sense demands presentation of *what is not as if it were* – the essence of fictions – which is impossible without the concept of *otherness*. In this sense meaning in distinctively human semiotics is primarily, though not exclusively, the *other* of the sign as it now *is*, that which the sign under other circumstances *would not be* – more specific to symbolicity than iconicity or indexicality. And the ‘semiotically real’ – as distinguished from the ‘real’ *an sich* – is the product of meaning, that which the ‘semiotically real’ *is not*. That is to say, the ‘semiotically real’ is the product of meaning, with which it is endowed by the *other* of signs, and the signs’ meaning is *other* than the signs, that is, it is incorporated in the relationship between the ‘semiotically real,’ the signs, and their respective *other*. Meaning is in the interrelations, in the interaction, the interconnectedness. Meaning is thus in a sense parasitic on the ‘real.’ It severs it, carves it up, and at times mutilates it, in order to make way for the construction of signs and ‘semiotically real’ worlds of various and sundry stripes.

Chapter 4 engages in a discussion of Peirce’s ‘pragmatic maxim.’ In order to develop this theme, the above-mentioned fiction/‘real’ distinction is provisionally introduced by way of Pierre Duhem’s exposition on two alternative scientific views and methods: English empiricism and French rationalism. Attention is then turned to what might be considered an inevitable topic, in light of the sets of distinctions put forth in previous chapters: Peirce’s concept of ‘thought-signs,’ and Alexis von Meinong’s mental ‘objects.’ In spite of my rhetorical practices to that point, the argument will be presented that there are no absolute distinctions, classes, or taxonomies of which we as human semiotic agents are capable. During this argument, the fallacy of traditional notions of ‘reference,’ ‘correspondence,’ ‘representation,’ and ‘objectivity’ come to the fore. This issue brings with it implications of Peirce’s somewhat unhappy concoction of ‘idealism’ and ‘objectivism’ – or perhaps one might say, ‘realism’

and ‘subjectivism,’ depending upon the vantage – which Peirce dubbed ‘objective idealism,’ a brief discussion of which will conclude this chapter. The next move, in chapter 5, inspired by philosophy of science and mathematics, brings *inconsistency* and *incompleteness* and their sister terms, *vagueness* and *generality* and *overdetermination* and *underdetermination*, to a shrill pitch. The accompanying suggestion is that *inconsistency* at local – and radically *incomplete* – levels can and in many cases should be tolerated, since sooner or later during our semiotic practices an anomaly or two will pop up anyway. But, the suggestion will be that we should try for *consistency* at larger levels, though there is no way we can really know without a shadow of a doubt if the whole is *consistent*, for there is no view, *sub specie aeternitatis*, accessible to us. In other words, the venerable concept of foundations is placed in question. In this regard at least, Peirce, it will become evident, is quite contemporary, and in line with much postanalytic, postpositivist, poststructuralist thought.

A brief Interlude follows, consisting of chapter 6. There, finally, I get to the meat of the matter. I present for further consideration what I hold to be the genuine Peircean concept of triadicity, in contrast to the customary semiotic ‘triangle’ and to semiological binary notions of the sign. I offer a preliminary discussion of Peirce’s basic sign types and their interrelations, which will be used as a wedge to pry open the faults and fissures of ‘standard reference theory,’ particularly from Gottlob Frege onward. During this discussion, the concepts of *learnability*, *accountability*, and *knowability* are introduced by way of a brief return to *vagueness* and *generality* and *overdetermination* and *underdetermination*, with special focus on *acts of relating*, rather than *things related to*.

Chapter 7 continues the critique of Frege’s concept of meaning, illustrating in the process that his program of ‘linguicism,’ of ‘objectivism,’ of a static view of signs and the determinacy of their meaning, is by and large inadequate. The work of Georg Cantor and Richard Dedekind with respect to sets and the problem of infinity emerges, which will have a bearing on future chapters, especially during considerations of Nelson Goodman, Putnam, W.V.O. Quine, and, of course, Peirce. In the following chapter I present various guises of what I dub ‘linguicentric holism,’ quite the vogue in some circles these days, and its limitations *vis-à-vis* ‘semiotic holism.’ On so doing, I introduce Putnam’s controversial yet intriguing rendition of the Löwenheim-Skolem theorem in his account of natural language use and the problematics of meaning. I attempt to illustrate how the theorem has a lesson for us regarding the now familiar terms *vagueness-generality*, *inconsistency-incompleteness*, and *overdetermination-underdetermination*. Chapter 9 then focuses on Putnam’s ‘There is no God’s Eye view’ in light of his ‘brains-in-a-vat’ thought experiment, which argues that meanings are not in the head, the object, or the sign, which

also supports the idea, presented in chapters 2 and 3, that there is no determinable ahistorical boundary between fiction and the ‘real’ and the ‘semiotically real’ and the ‘real.’ This discussion then introduces, by way of a few Jorge Luis Borges–inspired examples, various paradoxes of infinity: how Peirce’s concept of the sign bears on them, and why we cannot escape them once and for all. I suggest that, given human imaginative capacities, there is less closure to thought and to signs than even Putnam might be willing to admit. To make matters apparently worse, an intractable element of uncertainty, revealing our ultimate limitations, remains. Yet there is, in the final analysis, a vague sort of closure, if only because, after exhaustion ensues, or upon reaching a hitherto unforeseen point, we can go no further.

Chapter 10 extends the reasons why ‘standard reference theory’ is inadequate in view of Putnam’s ‘twin-earth’ thought experiment. Peirce’s concept of sign *translation*, I then argue, entails the process of meaning engenderment: signs becoming *other* than what they are, becoming a ‘difference that makes a difference,’ which is the very essence of semiotic meaning. Putnam’s Löwenheim-Skolem model is re-evoked and briefly placed alongside Quine’s celebrated but occasionally maligned example of a field linguist attempting to learn the language of another culture in his display of the ‘indeterminacy of translation’ and the ‘inscrutability of reference’ theses. This juxtaposition of Putnam and Quine brings on a reintroduction of *vagueness* – by way of the ‘sorites paradox’ – as well as *generality* and *overdetermination-underdetermination*, which constantly threaten to abrogate the classical principles of noncontradiction and the excluded middle. All these moves, I observe, are tangentially related to Peirce, who never ceased in his effort to bring abstractions in line with the ‘concrete reasonableness’ of everyday living. From the Peircean perspective I then argue that since I present a concept of meaning as indefinitely variable, alternative meanings can always pop up when least expected. Notice: the meandering, self-reflexive, at times convoluting and involuting path this book takes gently nudges us along, and the nebulous horizon becomes somewhat more distinct, though it cannot but remain vague, out there, somewhere, in the horizon; we and the meanings of our signs are one, and precisely for that reason our game of lassoing them in for an objective look is so aggravatingly elusive. Yet, we can’t simply let meanings be, for they are us and we them.

Chapter 11 addresses what appears at the outset to be a hopelessly bizarre Putnam thought experiment: the apparently simple ‘Cat on a mat’ sentence mistaken for ‘Cherries on a tree.’ I use Putnam’s story in an attempt to illustrate, via Borges’s Pierre Menard, that the very idea of reference is even more radically indeterminate than Quine would have it, for all signs are indelibly caught up in the process of their becoming. Chapter 12 then addresses Goodman’s ‘new

riddle of induction,’ in conjunction with a brief discussion of the Duhem-Quine thesis, Ludwig Wittgenstein on rule following, and Carl Hempel’s ‘raven paradox.’ I contend that a ‘time-dependent logic,’ a nonformal ‘logic of vagueness,’ predicated on Firstness in addition to Secondness and Thirdness – a ‘logic’ Peirce often promised but did not deliver – is necessary. In order to substantiate this argument, a synthesis of Frege, Putnam, Goodman, and Quine is brought into further relation with *vagueness-generality* and *overdetermination-underdetermination* in order to provide a new context for their interpretation. This brings me back, once again, to the idea of meaning. I suggest that even regarding natural and formal languages, meaning cannot live either by symbolicity and Thirdness or by indexicality and Secondness alone: a dose of iconicity is always present, whether we know it or not and whether we like it or not. Given this view, in my subsequent discussion, the body is at long last returned to the sign, and the icon to the symbol (via the index), which has also been a topic of much concern in our postanalytic, poststructuralist, postmodern times.

Chapter 13 offers a synoptic grasp of the thought experiments, perspectives, and conjectures discussed thus far. In their composite they are guilty of ‘linguicism’ (a product of the ‘linguistic turn’). Peirce’s *abduction*, the third leg of his tripod including *induction* and *deduction*, is introduced, with the contention that all three components of this triad are necessary for a ‘logic’ of creativity, invention, and construction, and for their incorporation into a given community’s body of narrative of all sorts. Chapter 14 offers a crash course on Peirce’s concept of the sign. One would expect that the first chapter of a book of this nature should introduce Peirce on the sign. But no. I have organized things in a roundabout way. The method of my madness is this: if the ephemerality, the elusiveness, of the very idea of meaning is first sensed, felt, intuited, from many angles, then the impact of Peirce’s sign theory should be all the more intriguing. At least that is what I would like to think. With this in mind, I present the specifics of Peirce’s three basic trichotomies, *qualisigns-sinsigns-legisigns*, *icons-indices-symbols*, and *terms(words)-propositions(sentences)-arguments(texts)* and place them in the context of the previous chapters. Then, I attempt to evoke the general notion that, if our signs and their meanings are at one with us and we with them, then there can be no body-mind distinction, but both, as signs among signs, are fused into the effervescent stream of *semiosis*. And finally, chapter 15 foregrounds the role of the body, of the contribution of kinesthetic, corporeal, visceral sensing and feeling in meaning engenderment. The recent work of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson is evoked, as is briefly that of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and others. Ultimately, I suggest, meaning is actually nowhere and nowhen, but always already in the process of emerging within

particular *semiotic* contexts. It is, simply put, in the beginning ‘felt,’ and only then can it be articulated – albeit vaguely, incompletely, and indeterminately, as it were.

Now the body is squarely within the sign. But actually, it was there all along. We just didn’t know it, or didn’t want to acknowledge it, soporifically caught up as we generally are in what we would like to think is our venerable hard-nosed discourse, which remains divorced from corporeal and even visceral feelings, sentiments, wishes, desires, and needs – all of which is OK for common folk, but not for us. The message is that our signs are indelibly corporeal as well as intellectual, during the course of all our comings and goings. Yes. The sign is put back in the bodymind, after centuries of exclusive residence in the imaginary limbo of the Western mind that presumably remained autonomous of, and when at its best the imperious master of, the body.

### The Design

A brief word on the strategies involved in this inquiry is also in order. After the *Preamble* was set on paper, I decided to eschew footnotes altogether in the remainder of this volume: footnotes tend to be cumbersome, a nuisance, often superfluous, and at times hardly more than the author’s ostentatious show of pseudo-erudition and an insult to the reader. Some of what might otherwise go into footnote fodder is found in the text in the form of parenthetical material – as you already witnessed in the second section of this introduction. These asides can be taken or they can be simply ignored, according to the curiosity, patience, and whims of the reader.

Throughout the pages that follow, I allude often to semiology (in contrast to Peircean semiotics), poststructuralism, and deconstruction, without qualifying the terms. These allusions are for the most part to trends in continental thought, about which this inquiry is not. In the first place, I assume the terms are sufficiently familiar to the reader not to warrant detailed treatment here. In the second place, since I have offered commentary and critique on semiology, poststructuralism, and deconstruction elsewhere (Merrell 1985, 1991, 1992, 1995a, 1995b, 1996), I see no need to reiterate those arguments here.

In presenting my arguments, I avail myself of a host of examples, many of them in the way of paradoxes, to illustrate the various facets of my thesis on meaning as they emerge in the text. These examples should perhaps be taken as extended metaphors, conceits, or even parables: they are icons that indexically point out, however vaguely, the message of the story being told – or perhaps they may indicate the ‘punch lines,’ if you will, of cynical games and satirical twists. All in all, the text is a display to be gazed upon, contemplated.

It is not a linear argument against linear arguments; it is an intricate web, not a set of bifurcating pathways; it is a nonlinear rhizome, not roots and branches.

### Acknowledgments

I suppose that by some stretch of the imagination it could be said that the words in this book are mine. But not really. The ideas implied by the marks on the pages that follow, to be sure, come from elsewhere. From reading, listening, looking, pondering, contemplating, or whatever. I doubt that there is a single novel idea in these pages, or in the other pages I have had the good fortune to see in print. If the ideas are not mine, then neither are the words, since all ideas are signs anyway. Consequently, whatever I have been able to put into traces on the monitor are by no means the result of closet thinking. I have been aided by many friends and associates, more often than not unbeknownst to them.

Though the many scholars who have influenced me during my mental wanderings are too numerous to list here, I cannot fail to make mention of certain individuals who are most prominent in my mind as I conclude this preface. First and foremost are Tom Sebeok, Marcel Danesi, and Ron Schoeffel, whose support was instrumental toward realization of this book in its present form. I also owe a special debt to those who attended a seminar I had the good fortune to conduct during the fall of 1993, during which time I was able to air out many of the ideas that follow. Anthropologist Professor Myrdene Anderson’s moderative voice as an auditor was ubiquitous, as was the critical voice of literary theorist Professor Silvia Dapía. I thank them for their collegiality, patience, and input. Graduate student auditors from Spanish (Pithamber Polsani) and French (Anjali Prabhu) provided contributions far exceeding my expectations, especially in view of the fact that they were under the added pressure of forthcoming preliminary exams. And my students, hailing from Anthropology (Bret Bogart), Communication (Sibley Law), Comparative Literature (Denise Galarza, Yolanda Gamboa, Ozlem Ogut), and Spanish (Patricia Santos, Lucero Tenorio-Gavin), provided an ear, an inquisitive mind, a proper dose of doubt and scepticism to buffer my vanities, and plenty of creative input to prevent my expositions from lapsing into totally incoherent mumbling.

Finally, to Araceli, thank you, many times over. More often than not, wrapped within my own frail thoughts, and in single-minded pursuit of something – I never know what – I am not the easiest person to get along with. To you I owe whatever might be of some worth in these modest pages.