

## **Literacy Practice in the Piazza: An Analysis of Italian Graduation Scrolls**

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*University commencement rituals inhabit Padua's urban landscape, centering on the graduate's reading from the papiro, or scroll, in front of friends and family. Scrolls include hypersexualized images of graduates and rhymed poems that recount their lives, particularly sexually explicit moments. I analyze graduation scrolls in both as a ritual and literacy shaping and shaped by gender and classed identities and understandings. How does this reading evoke various linguistic ideologies as scrolls are written in standard Italian, the regional Veneto dialect and English? I interrogate how this linguistic practice both challenges and reinforces existing understandings of gender, sex and class. I also focus on how the actions of graduates during the ritual, and the visual images on scrolls, confirm, and sometimes contradict, the written narrative. After an introduction to the history of scrolls in Padua, I analyze one man's scroll with specific attention to embedded voices and code-switching between Veneto dialect and standardized Italian. Together with ethnographic details, close linguistic analysis, and a variety of theoretical insights, I undertake an analysis of this unique graduation ritual, carefully examining debasement, parody, and the reconstitution of social hierarchies.*

After completing his thesis defense for the University of Padua, Beppe proceeded to the main square of the city. His sister and a few friends stripped him to his underwear, a skintight pink jumpsuit, and a black cape and mask, and pinned on floor-length armpit hair extensions. The new graduate slipped into an oversized diaper and read aloud the words on his *papiro*, (scroll), a poetic narrative of his own life, beginning with the following lines: "In a random summer day a thunderstorm was roaring. Returning from work Romeo mounted Danila/and he brought her to the bedroom/In the twinkling of an eye he had her doggy-style/From that grand passion a baby was born/And everyone called him Beppe, the little idiot."<sup>1</sup>

In this paper, I draw upon New Literacy Studies, performativity theory, and studies of the carnivalesque to "situate" a literacy event: the ritualized reading of hypersexualized

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<sup>1</sup> See excerpt of Beppe's scroll, lines 1-6.

life narratives in urban Italy (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Bakhtin, 1984; Butler, 1997a; Street, 1984; Gee, 1992). Construing this literacy event as a culturally specific social event, I unravel the ways in which ritual practices and the textual and visual language of Italian graduation poems are embedded in larger structures—asymmetrical gender and class dynamics (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Besnier, 1995; Kulick & Stroud, 1990; Ahearn, 1998; McElhinny, 2002). I also examine the intertextuality of scrolls, how a single phrase or image resonates with an entire constellation of dialogic texts, practices and structures (Bakhtin, 1984; Butler, 1997a; Hamilton, 2000). This work proceeds in dialogue with what Janet Maybin (2000) puts forth as a critical undertaking of New Literacy Studies, to “show how literacy events are part of continual construction and negotiation of identity” (p. 207).

This ritual literacy event marks the achievement of social status for a younger generation; it connects to the rich terrain of cultural and linguistic anthropology work on ritual, performance and life stages (Bauman & Briggs, 1990; Bateson, 1972; Duranti, 1983; Hymes, 1975; Irvine, 1979; Turner, 1967; Sherzer, 1987). In conversation with studies of class, gender and ritual (see also Galt, 1991; Lewis, 1991; MacClancy & Parkin, 1997), Italy, I focus on ritualized literacy practices in Northern urban centers of Italy. Selecting from the many layers of this literacy event, I center my analysis on the visual and textual language of the final product—the publicly displayed scroll—as an entrance point for articulating the complexities of ritually enacted gender and class identities.

### 1. Setting the Stage: University of Padua

Padua, Italy is an urban center of approximately 250,000 people in the northeastern Veneto region of Italy. Graduation ceremonies take place at the University of Padua, a 90,000-student institution. In the Italian educational system, university students graduate, one by one, on the day they complete their research project defense. Graduations thus take place around the academic year. While many graduations may take place on the same day, each ceremony is organized and prepared around one person. Having conducted fieldwork between June and August in 2001 and 2002, as well as a longer period of residency in Padua (September, 1999-July 2000), I draw from ethnographic participation, interviews and archival research.

Graduation performances inhabit the space of Padua's town squares; scroll reading is both daily social practice and marked ceremonial ritual. The physical presence of scrolls hung on the university wall, the passing of half-dressed or costumed bodies, and the sound of ceremonial songs are part of urban life in Padua.

In preparation for this event, friends and family of the graduate create a *papiro*, literally a “scroll” on which there is written a rhymed narrative that usually begins with the graduate's prenatal conception, parental copulation, followed by a collection of childhood, adolescence and college-day vignettes written in a mix of standard Italian, Veneto dialect and English, among other languages. Visual representations, with either a photographed or caricature-styled face and a drawn hypersexualized body are central to scrolls. Superelongated penises, gigantic breasts, sexual acts, bodily fluids and corporeal orifices abound in these images. In the final steps of preparation, print shops print the scroll using a standardized white paper and size (3' X 5'), printing multiple copies for graduation day festivities.

On the day of graduation, friends and family attend the graduate's thesis defense in the halls of the university. After the graduate has passed, the group proceeds downstairs to Piazza del Bò, the historical square of the university. Graduates are then stripped to either a bathing suit or underwear and put in various costumes such as cross-gender clothing, garbage bags, and animal suits. They are then adorned with makeup and wigs, sometimes covered with eggs, wine, whipped cream, hairspray, duct tape and other substances and, finally, crowned with a laurel wreath decorated with a red bow, the color of graduation. Climbing onto one of the square's benches, the graduate is then presented with the *papiro*.

Many scrolls switch between Veneto dialect, a largely spoken register, and standard Italian. The reading of the scroll becomes an interactive game between the graduate and other participants: errors in pronunciation and any verbal falterings are joyfully penalized by friends and family. This game depends upon the fact that many Paduans speak Veneto dialect on a daily basis but rarely, if ever, read it. In school, they have learned standardized Italian for reading and writing. When graduates falter or pause during the course of their reading, they are forcefully requested to take a slug of wine. Alternatively, friends might discipline the reader with the generous application of sticky and/or edible substances on their bodies. Reading competence in Veneto dialect is quite rare, insuring that graduates will finish the reading rather inebriated.

The reading of the *papiro* is an overtly polyphonic event. Graduates often object to their portrayal or embellish the accounts with further detail, and participants likewise contest various points or add details. Together they create a rich verbal exchange, engaging in dynamic conversations. Niko Besnier (1995) has pointed to the ways in which "literacy and orality are frequently intertwined in social life, and the relationship between the two must be examined before the meaning of literacy (and orality, for that matter) can be understood in all its complexities" (p. 12; see also Heath, 1983). Examining either the physical *papiro* or the verbal and physical exchanges around its reading in isolation would miss critical components of its meaning and significance.

Upon completion of the reading, graduates receive a few ritualized kicks in the bottom and are sent under a tunnel of participants' spread arms, whereupon they will be gleefully swatted on the bottom. The friends and family of the graduate parade the graduate around the town, using the newly acquired title "doctor" for the first time in the following lyric: "*Dottore, dottore, dottore nel buso del cul, vaffancul, vaffancul*" (Doctor, doctor, doctor in your asshole, up your ass, up your ass).<sup>2</sup>

Graduates eventually get redressed and celebrate at one of Padua's many cafés. At the end, *confetti*, or sugar-coated almonds wrapped in red tissue paper or cloth, are distributed to the guests as a graduation favor. Significantly, for the next few days, a copy of the scroll is left hanging on the walls of the university for public viewing, serving to extend the community of scroll readership. The hanging scroll becomes a material memorial of the ritualized reading, leaving a highly visible, physical mark on the space of the town.

Many graduates bring a copy of their scroll for display in their hometown, particularly since many students commute to Padua from their parents' home in nearby villages. It is

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<sup>2</sup> All translations are mine unless otherwise noted. The bold words indicate words in Veneto dialect or what may be interpreted as such. The song itself "*Vaffanculo*" means both "up your ass" and "fuck you"; I have selected the former because the latter translation misses the abundant anal references in scrolls, as well as the fact that "*vaffanculo*" comes from "*vai a fare in culo*" or, literally, "go do it up your ass."

therefore quite typical to see these scrolls hung in smaller town squares or in windows of family businesses or locales across the Veneto region at all times of the year. This literacy event is memorialized as graduates also hang their scroll in their bedrooms or submit copies to Paduan websites.

### 1.1. *Coming-of-Age and Citing Carnavalesque*

In provocative and hypersexualized textual and visual language, these texts describe sexual trysts and bodily practices in vivid detail. As such, we might view these texts as Bakhtinian carnivalesque—moments of corporeal and symbolic rearrangement, degradation, and exaggeration (Limón, 1989; Bauman & Briggs, 1990; Gilmore, 1995; Kang, 2001). Building on the nuanced work of Jose Limón, David Gilmore and others, I frame the carnivalesque of this ritual in terms of power relations. To do so, I borrow the concept of “citation” from Judith Butler’s performativity theory, a term deployed to capture the process whereby language produces gendered subjectivities, relying on a history of prior uses—including asymmetries of dominance. Viewing scroll performances as both a literacy and a citational practice, I ask how reversals may reproduce underlying social asymmetries, even as they transgress norms of appropriate public discourse. Indeed, New Literacy Studies, led by Barton, Hamilton, Boynaham, Street and others, emphasize the reproduction of power relations in literacy events: “Socially powerful institutions, such as education, tend to support dominant literacy practices. These dominant practices can be seen as part of whole discourse formations, institutionalized categories of power and knowledge which are embodied in social relationships” (Barton & Hamilton, 1998, p.10; see also Giddens, 1991).

I also trace an affinity between Butler’s (1997) notion of citationality, as “speech...breaking with prior contexts of its utterance and acquiring new contexts for which it was not intended” (14), and the notion of intertextuality as “cross linkages of language in use” (Spitulnik, 1998, p. 95; Ahearn, 1998). Citationality is as much a part of dialogic language for Vološinov (1973) it was for Butler’s notion of performativity. As Vološinov notes, “[Any utterance] is but one link in a continuous chain of speech performances” (p. 72). Moments of linguistic and corporeal exaggeration and degradation *cannot* be understood outside of previous contexts and broader social inequalities.

## 2. One Scroll, Many Voices

Centering on the *papiro* of a young male student, “Beppe,” a graduate in telecommunications engineering in November 2000, I have organized Beppe’s 238-line graduation poem into a series of shorter passages.<sup>3</sup>

- (1) In un qualsiasi giorno d'estate un temporale infuriava  
In a random summer day a thunderstorm was roaring
- (2) tornando dal lavoro Romeo contro Danila si strizzava  
Returning from work Romeo mounted Danila
- (3) oibò la portò in camera da letto  
and so he brought her to the bedroom
- (4) e in quattro e quattro otto la mise a cavollotto.  
In the twinkling of an eye he had her doggy-style

<sup>3</sup> Transcription Notes: Words or phrases in capitals are Veneto dialect. [/] indicates line jump. ‘Beppe’ is a nickname of this informant, used here with his permission. I have used first names for the scrolls quoted from the website [www.spritz.it](http://www.spritz.it) and pseudonyms for all other scrolls quoted here.

- (5) Da quella grande passione nacque un pargoletto  
From that grand passion a baby was born
- (6) e tutti chiamarono Beppe l'occhetto  
And everyone called Beppe, the little idiot
- (7) I parenti al reparto maternità  
In the maternity wing his relatives
- (8) unanimi gridano: "I NE'O GÀ CAMBIÀ!!" //  
screamed in unison: "They switched the baby on us!!" //
- (17) E fu così che con l'uccello che pende  
And so with his hanging little birdy
- (18) Tenta infingardo di bagnarle le tende.  
He tries fearlessly to pee on her curtains
- (19) Il piccolo Beppe cresceva  
Little Beppe was growing up
- (20) e di tanto in tanto si toccava la tega  
And from time to time he touched his little penis
- (21) alle prime malizie cominciava ad arrossire  
With his first sins, he began to blush
- (22) e la sua libidine doveva smaltire.  
and his libido should have settled down.
- (23) Con tutte le bambine si voleva sfogare,  
He wanted to unburden himself with all the little girls.
- (24) e sotto le gonnelline iniziava a toccare://  
And he began to touch underneath their little skirts.//
- (71) ma un dubbio ogni tanto gli veniva:  
But every now and then he had a doubt.
- (72) "come sarà fatta la figa?!"  
What is a vagina like?"
- (73) Agli amici si affidò  
He trusted his friends.
- (74) per diventare un gigolò,  
to [help him] become a gigolo.
- (75) ma tutti i tentativi furono vani  
but all his efforts were in vain.
- (76) Beppe non riusciva ad instaurare legami.  
Beppe couldn't manage to make any connections.
- (77) Questa sua voglia sopprimere lui doveva  
He had to suppress his desire.
- (78) per questo pensò di farsi una sega; //  
So to do so, he thought about jerking off. //
- (79) finalmente "al Badia"  
finally in Badia
- (80) levò dalla lingua la scarpia  
he got out his tongue from the cobwebs
- (135) Ai festini della Paola partecipava  
He went to Paola's little parties
- (136) assistendo ogni donna che vomitava  
Helping every woman that threw up.
- (137) tentava di sedurle con la sua "Z" sensuale  
He tried to seduce them with his sensual "Z"
- (138) ma le donne gli dicevano: "buttati in canale!" //  
But women told him: "Go throw yourself in the canal!" //
- (141) Alcol e fumo: era sempre una serata devastante  
Alcohol and smoke: it was a horrendous night
- (142) Tanto che Beppe sbotta: 'senti che puzza da lestofante!'  
Meanwhile Beppe blurts: 'smell that beastly odor!'

- (152) Caro Beppe, che non ti fa usare l'uccello;  
Dear Beppe, that won't let you use your little birdy;
- (153) ma noi comunque ti siamo vicini,  
But we are with you anyway,
- (154) abbiamo anche acceso in chiesa dei lumini  
We've even lit some little church candles
- (155) e in coro ci uniamo a gridare  
And in chorus we get together and scream
- (156) "DESSO CHE TE GÀ FINIO DE STUDIARE  
"now that you've finished studying
- (157) CALA LA PANSA E SCUMIZIA A CIAVARE!" //
- (158) Lose the tummy and start screwing!" //
- (198) "Riuscirò a scoparmene una nella mia vita!"  
"I'll screw someone in my life!"
- (199) e in pizzeria incontra la prosperosa Anita  
and he meets buxom Anita in the pizzeria.
- (200) tra una pizza e l'altra le mani allungava  
between one pizza and another his hands were reaching out
- (201) ma lei sempre il 2 di picche gli tirava. //
- (202) but she never gave him a thing<sup>4</sup> //
- (232) Per il Gran Finale uno scoop abbiám trovato,  
For the Big Finale, we've found a good scoop.
- (233) speriamo che dai presenti sia confermato,  
We hope that it's confirmed by those present.
- (234) in gita a Parigi con Giamma andò  
he went on a trip to Paris with Giamma
- (235) alcol e donne in abbondanza trovò  
He found alcohol and women in abundance
- (236) Passò 6 notti tutto arrapato  
He stayed there six horny nights
- (237) e sul letto della sig.na Galtarossa una mattina fu trovato,  
and in the morning he was found in the bed of Miss Galtarossa
- (238) vuoi vedere che almeno una volta ha trombato??!!  
You wanna bet that he got laid at least once???
- (255) Gli Consigliamo (x il futuro da ingegnere)  
We advise him (for his future as an engineer)
- (256) TAJATE CHEL BARBIN DA CAN!  
Cut that dog beard!
- (257) MAGNA MANCO!  
Eat less!
- (258) LAVATE DE PIÚ!  
Wash yourself more!
- (259) CAVATE CHEI PELI DALA VITA!  
Cut that body hair away your life!
- (260) Ricorda di portare sempre con te la brusca per i tarza nelli  
Remember to bring your brush for black butthair
- (261) DAGHE ARIA ALLA SCATOLA ROTONDA CHE TE GHÉ NEL ZAINO!  
Air out that round box that you've got in your backpack!

### 3. Sexing the Scroll

I begin my analysis with one important feature of the text, code-switching between Veneto dialect and standard Italian, a critical feature in numerous graduation scrolls.

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<sup>4</sup> This is literally "She gave him a deuce," the lowest playing card in a deck of 52.

Informed by work in the field of linguistic ideologies (Kroskrity, 2000; Irvine & Gal, 2000; Scheffelin, 2001), I argue that the use of linguistic registers must be understood in terms of a multiple meanings associated with a particular language and its use. The dominant language ideology of the area holds Veneto dialect to be the more crude, ugly, and yet also more regionally authentic and linguistically complex of the two varieties. The use of dialect indexes rural origins of students at a moment in which they gain class status and potential urban mobility via educational achievement, both of which manifest the dominant ideologies of standardized Italian and Veneto. In their use of both linguistic registers, the performance of graduation scrolls makes visible a tension between the high achievement of educational and social status, associated with standard Italian, and the lower status of rural and working class families, hailed as dialect speakers (Philips, 2000; Linke, 2002). References to Veneto dialect indicate what Paul Kroskrity (2001) has called “linguistic biographies” (p. 411)—Veneto speech indexes the geographic histories of speakers’ past, in addition to, the practice of commuting to Padua from rural towns. In fact, speakers often define the notion of an urban, Paduan accent as a less dialect-inflected accent. The sharing of scroll texts provides a site for creating what Barton and Hamilton (1998) call discourse communities, as Paduans share “characteristic ways of talking, acting, interpreting and using written language” (p. 10).

In certain instances, particularly when compared to ideologies of other Italian dialects, Veneto dialect seems to signal the high economic, social and political position of Veneto residents, or more broadly, Northern Italians. Thus, notions of Veneto dialect, however, are much more complex; language ideologies are dialogic and multiple. Susan Gal (1998) notes, “Different ideologies construct alternate, even opposing realities; they create differing views arising from and often constituting different social positions and subjectivities within a single social formation” (p. 320). How one language ideology becomes more authoritative or intelligible is a contested and shifting process (Gal, 1998; Woolard, 1998; Spitulnik, 1998, Kroskrity 2000). A Veneto accent might indeed signal prestige when Veneto dialect speakers move outside the region, at the same time it signals a working-class or rural background within the region. In the case of the *papiro*, unpacking when and how such multiple ideologies are indexed, it is necessary to consider a variety of contextual clues.

To unpack how sexual desire is constructed and installed linguistically in this scroll, I turn first to how Beppe’s voice is deployed in this narrative in direct quotes. Beppe’s embedded voice is often written in Veneto dialect (lines 16, 68, 110, 119, 134, 142, 145, 220-221) along with the voices of his family (line 8), and friends (lines 156-157). Some of his quotes include the following lines: “*Fammi scopare come un diavoleto*” (Let me fuck like a little devil) line 38; (2) “*VOTO VEDARE CHE XE ORA DE USARE L’OSEO?*” (I bet it’s time to use the boner?) line 68; (3) above, line 72; and (4) “*A GÓ VOJA DE DOPERARE L’OSELO*” (I feel like using the boner) (line 145). These lines simultaneously index the animator and principal figure’s (Goffman, 1981) sexual desires, and, as I explore below, suggest his failure to engage in sexual relations with women. The use of Veneto dialect in this context reflects and further shapes language ideologies surrounding it as the preferred register for sexual innuendo, emotion and comedy.

Beppe’s scroll also shares some metalinguistic discourse about dialect use such as “*la sua ‘Z’ sensuale*” (his sensual “Z”; line 137) (Lucy, 1993). This refers to the type of non-prestige accent one acquires as a result of speaking Veneto dialect, as well as the graduate’s idiosyncratic accent. According to the graduate, and some of his friends, the

tone in this utterance is distinctly ironic, indicating his way of speaking as anything but “sensual.”

Flurries of sexual desire are linked to various sexual practices, particularly masturbation as a dominant feature of Beppe’s life narrative (lines 19-24), followed by many other repeated references (lines 77, 91, 140). As Emily Martin’s (1994) work reminds us, personalized narratives about bodily processes often intersect with scientific discourse about the body. Implicit knowledge about the body inform the production of culturally intelligible gender identity and understandings; hence, dominant ideologies of biology and science frame the fleeting debauchery of carnivalesque sexuality. Interestingly, an online guidebook about writing scrolls in Padua laments that masturbation is a theme almost exclusively for men. It then provides examples of writing about women’s onanistic practices to balance the general absence in actual scroll texts. That the writing and content of female masturbation narratives are in flux shows texts to be emergent, following what Richard Bauman (2001) says of performance as “the nexus of tradition, practice and emergence in verbal art” (p. 184; see also Bakhtin, 1981).

Even though it is considered a vulgar or obscene topic of conversation, masturbation is nonetheless a diffuse topic of humor. Bakhtin was interested in precisely this sort of ambiguity in carnivalesque practices: “These abuses were ambivalent: while humiliating and mortifying they at the same time revived and renewed. It was precisely this ambivalent abuse which determined the genre of speech in carnival intercourse” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 16). Discursive masturbation debases male sexuality because it displays a failure to achieve heterosexual relations. Still, references to personalized sexual pleasure is also an affirmation of profuse male sexual desire and must be read against the general absence of female masturbation vignettes.

Carnavalesque language makes clear the link between sexual maturity and educational achievement, a presumed though more tacit understanding of adulthood in Beppe’s scroll (lines 232-238). In Beppe’s scroll (lines 152-157), the footing changes and the third-person singular narrative switches to the voice of “we,” addressing the graduate directly, before a final embedded direct quote of their voices (lines 156-7, also lines 232-238). Here, the “we” indicates the “double-voiced discourse” of his friends and family, sympathizing with his inability to have sexual relations. In his public reading, the graduate animates this collective voice that carries a judgment regarding his purported virginity.

Various vignettes in the scroll refer explicitly to Beppe’s gender deviance, that is, the text makes visible how he transgresses expectations of men in the realm of sexual relations. The main figure, the successful graduate, is repeatedly described as failing to seduce women and engage in sexual relations (lines 71-78, 135-138, 152-157, 198-201, 232-238). In general, I have found that graduation scrolls tend to dichotomize male sexuality, either emphasizing fantastic success or constructing notions of gross sexual deprivation.

Emerging from Beppe’s scroll is a distinctly recognizable notion of anti-masculinity. My analysis is informed by Deborah Cameron (1997) who has analyzed what “went unremarked” (p. 47) in a conversation among a collectivity of five young white American males in her analysis of gender in the context of the United States. Disavowal structures the production of utterances among the group—namely, around gender-deviants the conversationalists degrade as “gay.” She makes a significant intervention in the understanding of homosexuality, as it is invoked in terms of gender (as opposed to sexual)



deviancy, desiring unattractive women, dressing poorly, or having poor social skills. Similarly, scroll texts and their performance reflect how gender deviance, a marked social category, is simultaneously indexed linguistically.

In Beppe's scroll, he engages in practices, intelligible primarily in contrast to received notions of masculinity: failing to engage in sexual relations with women (lines 21-24, 71-78, 135-8, 152-156, 198, 200-201). These sex acts are included to mock the graduate and generate laughter, but they are also *ambivalent* precisely in that they rest between heterosexual desire and a notion of gender failure. Besnier (1995) has also noted how ritual contexts, in particular, are "dramatic instantiations of 'what not to be' for negatively prescriptive purposes" (p. 162; see also Turner, 1967; Scott, 1990). To be sure, these vignettes exaggerating Beppe's unfortunate love life generated much laughter and joy in the participants; indeed, one cannot forget that this ritual is also about pleasure and celebration. As Bakhtin (1981) reminds us, the displeasure of improbable or out-of-place texts or images "is overcome by forms of pleasure...we find some place for this exaggeration within reality" (p. 306). At the same time, the joy produced in and by the texts depends upon a shared linguistic and culturally specific notion of "normal" masculine sexual comportment to which the exaggeration, and parodied failure, refers (Livia & Hall, 1997).

Considering affirmations and negations to sexual activity within scrolls, I turn to Don Kulick's (2003) recent work on language and desire, in which he argues that acts of saying "yes" and "no" to sex enact culturally specific sexual subjectivities (see also Cameron & Kulick, 2003). In this essay, Kulick's (2003) approach follows from Butler, when he suggests, "A performative approach to language interrogates the circulation of language in society. How particular uses of languages...produce effects and particular kinds of subjects in fields or matrices of power" (p. 140). He argues that affirmations or negations are distinctly gendered; some responses will be culturally and linguistically marked, like men's "no" to sex. In Beppe's *papiro*, he effectively enacts a "no" to sexual relations though his inability to have sexual relations with a woman. At the same, he consistently enacts and laments such failures, thus performing a "yes" to heterosexual *desire* and, so, constituting a more stable gendered subject-position.

#### 4. Making Gender and Sexual Identities into Visual Icons

With a cartoon image of sexual intercourse over his head, Beppe is figured sitting atop a soccer ball with his long penis extending below his toes. Like the written language of scrolls, visual images of graduates carry a social history of sexualized and gendered contexts that network out and connect with multiple discourses (Hall, 1995, Litosseliti & Sunderland, 2002). These images are as dialogic as the text, referencing multiple domains of social and religious life and staging visual paradoxes, like the oversized phallus next to the unadorned Christian cross by his face.

Similarly, another young male graduate's scroll combines iconic images of genitals with Biblical references. A caricature of the graduate is pictured as surrounded by numerous vaginas—one even marks his forehead. Vaginas, as rendered here, have become locally iconic; they are immediately recognizable in this specific semantic field. His superelongated penis wraps around his body and transforms into the head of a snake with an apple in its mouth, referencing a familiar Biblical discourse of Eve's temptation. Intelligible gender, according to Butler (1990), relies on highly repetitious visual and textual language: "The possibilities of gender transformation are to be found precisely in

the arbitrary relation between acts, in the possibility of a failure to repeat" (p. 179). Scrolls, in my reading, are sites where such repetition is made more explicit.

Beppe's scroll is only one example of a proliferation of sexualized images in scrolls. Penises—flying, pointing, grilling, transforming into a computer mouse, or mutating into flagellating octopus tentacles—adorn the scrolls of both males and females (Haraway, 1991). However, there is a general absence of vaginas on female scrolls. For men's scrolls, the penis seems to emphasize heterosexuality, while the absence of vaginas on women's scrolls does not suggest homosexuality. Rather, the vagina does not seem to be necessary in signifying female heterosexuality as the phallus does for men. This recalls Kessler and McKenna's (1985) findings that the penis, no matter what other signifier it accompanied, indexed a "man" for participants. The proliferations of men's bodies surrounded by phalluses may produce the effect of homoerotic pleasure, rupturing the potentiality of the male genitals as *always and only* signifying heterosexuality.

Gender creeps across language to multiple symbolic domains, where representations of gender connect to race, class and sexuality. Divides between human and machine are dismantled visually and discursively in Paduan scrolls. The visual language of scrolls is dominated by men's technological sex acts, while women rarely are represented engaging in sexual acts with computers. In one man's scroll, his penis extends into the hands of a buxom, bikinied blonde woman as a gasoline hose of his race car. In another image, a design features a male graduate having intercourse with his computer as his penis punctures through it. Men's scrolls, unlike women's, exhibit the phallus in action, on the grills, as a gasoline hose, as a microphone, and as a snake whereas vaginas are not shown morphing into objects and animals. According to Mariella Pandolfi (2001), "We can read bodies as topographies that relate memory and community. These bodily traces create belonging and exclusion" (p. 12). The male body in the scroll bears a historical "trace" of social and economic hierarchies in fields of science and technology.

In contrast, the body of young female graduate is drawn as part of a cornucopia of food; complete with fruit, penis-shaped bananas, and hairy legs. Her body does not change into any particular machine or animal; indeed the image indexes primitivist stereotypes. Unlike the mutating and dynamic phalluses of male scrolls, her scroll shows her genitals covered with a fig leaf. Dominant discourses are carried in language, such that social "context is invoked and restaged at the moment of utterance" (Butler, 1997, p. 13). One word or image, even a single fig leaf, carries tropes of feminine modesty and female sexual discipline into this scroll.

## 5. Tracing the Grotesque Bodies

Both the text of the scrolls and their images exhibit a fantastic interest in the "lower" processes of the body, on flatulence, defecation, and a host of fluid emissions. The visual and textual language of the scrolls index, as a larger vocabulary, social codes about the body. Bakhtin (1981) and Turner (1967) have also noted that such bodily doings are themselves liminal or ambiguous states: moments of consumption and elimination interrupt the imagined boundary between the body's skin and the outside world.

On Beppe's scroll, lines emanating from his body are labeled "odor," and in a smaller image, a small figure is pictured preparing to defecate. In addition, language describes a bodily fluids (line 18), sexualized parts of bodies like breasts and tongues (line 19), and smells of bodies (line 142). Double-voiced discourse marks a subsection of the scroll

(lines 255-264), “*Gli Consigliamo*” (We Advise Him) in which Beppe animates the embedded voice of friends as they “speak” in Veneto dialect telling him to “*tajate chel barbin da can*” (Cut that dog beard), “*magna manco*” (eat less), “*cavate chei peli dala vita*” (Get rid of that back hair!) and “*Ricorda di portare sempre con te la brusca per i tarzanelli*” (Remember to bring the brush for your butt hair). These all point to classed proscriptions of a beautiful body—thin, clean, and hairless—that are shot through with classed understandings. After Mary Douglas, Laura Kipnis (1992) similarly theorizes American pornographic images as depicting a body “continually defying the structure of bourgeois manners and mores and instead governed by its lower intestinal tract—a body threatening to erupt at any moment” (p. 375). The performance of Italian graduation scrolls repeatedly constitutes a grotesque body, visually and textually, in contrast to the context of celebrating class privilege.

The grotesque body of scrolls condenses visual and textual language into a heightened illustration of classed constructions; “The grotesque body is a body in the act of becoming. It is continually built, created and builds and creates another body...This is why the essential role belongs to those parts of the grotesque body in which it outgrows its own self, transgressing its own body” (Bahktin, 1980, p. 317).

## 6. Literacy as Fluid

In this historical period of globalization, scholars have noted a proliferation of boundary-blurring flows, hybrid identities, and fragmentation (Harvey, 1989; Jameson, 1991; Hall, 1995) as well as heightened attention to bodies, sensuality and sexuality (Haraway, 1991; Martin, 1994; Butler, 1993; Linke, 1999). Transnational events are condensed into a local moment, a practice extends across time and space, a ritual text is larger than itself. Ethnographic approaches aim to examine literacy as not a unitary moment but a process, a structured practice extending across temporal and spatial domains (Bourdieu, 1991; Ortner, 1996; Barton, 1994; Ahearn, 2001a): “Literacy practices are as fluid, dynamic and changing as the lives and societies of which they are a part” (Barton & Hamilton, 1998, p. 12). Likewise, Butler (1997a) defines speech acts as a temporal process:

Discursive performativity is not discrete series of speech acts, but a ritual chain of resignifications whose origin and end remain unfixed and unfixable. In this sense, an “act” is not a momentary happening, but a certain nexus of temporal horizons, the condensation of iterability that exceeds the moment it occasions. (p. 14)

In the context of graduation scrolls, language is a site of becoming, a practice where language “presents the picture of a ceaseless flow of becoming” (Vološinov, 1973, p. 66). Graduation literacy practices in Padua expose ongoing and multiple regulations around gender, class and the body. Scrolls are sites of a becoming that take place in and through visual and textual language: becoming classed, becoming gendered, becoming a graduate.

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