

## Postcards from the Edge Decoding Winnipeg's "One Gay City" campaign

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### Article abstract

This article is an examination of Winnipeg visual artists Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan's gay-positive tourism campaign, which was suppressed by city residents and local media outlets alike. Using a coding model that suggests "coders" present challenging ideas in ambiguous ways to protect themselves from potentially dangerous responses, the essay demonstrates how the artists subversively employed strategies of appropriation, juxtaposition, distraction and trivialization to their campaign as a means of protecting themselves while reclaiming imagery and language associated with the queer community.

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## POSTCARDS FROM THE EDGE

### Decoding Winnipeg's "One Gay City" campaign

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When visual artists Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan embarked on their "tourism campaign" in September 1997 (created as part of a collaborative photographic art show), they thought they might attract visitors to Winnipeg, Manitoba by promising them a "gay old time." At first glance, the bright colours and playful images of their three postcards appear to be standard advertising fare. Closer inspection reveals a more subversive message, though — one that might have made some representatives from *Tourism Winnipeg* blush.

The artists' three postcards, collectively entitled "Winnipeg: One *Gay* City!," construct Winnipeg as a homosexual Mecca while mocking its popular "One Great City" slogan. One image features a man wearing only gold body paint, assuming the pose of the Golden Boy, a landmark statue of a naked man that stands atop the city's legislative building. The caption reads: "(Winnipeg): Where everyone is *light* in the loafers!" (figure 1). A second postcard shows a woman dressed in rugged outdoor clothing and holding a string of fish, appropriating the popular (male) Manitoba pastime of fishing, with the caption, "Where the *fishing* is great!" (figure 2). The third features an ultra-feminine young girl with a delighted look on her face, sitting behind a birthday cake decorated with toy boats and trains. The caption on this postcard: "Where every child can grow up to be *whoever* they want to be!" (figure 3). All three postcards prominently display the "Winnipeg: One *Gay* City" slogan.

When I first saw these images in the November 1997 edition of *Swerve*, Winnipeg's lesbian and gay publication, I was intrigued by their political and humorous content. I contacted *Swerve's* editor to find out where the postcards could be purchased, and was directed to a local gift shop. Three dollars later,



Figure 1

I had a copy of each in hand, and had learned of the project's history from the shop employee. Convinced the postcards would generate a rather *fruitful* analysis, I contacted artists Dempsey and Millan to learn more about the tourism campaign, and thus begins my discussion here.

Were the postcards innocuous tourist paraphernalia, or a deliberate attack on homophobia? This was a guiding question of my research, and Joan Radner and Susan Lanser's discussion of coding provides a useful model for responding to it. In *Feminist Messages: Coding in Women's Folk Culture*, the authors argue that coded acts are deliberate or unconscious expressions of disturbing ideas, presented in ambiguous ways to protect the "coder" (in this case, the artists) and often the audience as well, from potentially dangerous responses. The authors define "coding" as:

a set of signals — words, forms, behaviors, signifiers of some kind — that protect the creator from the consequences of openly expressing particular messages. Coding occurs in the context of complex audiences in which some members may be willing to decode the message, but others are not (Radner and Lanser 1993: 3).

Though protection of the openly lesbian Dempsey and Millan is not the issue, four of the coding strategies Radner and Lanser identify apply to the "One *Gay* City" campaign: appropriation, juxtaposition, distraction and trivialization. This essay examines the connections between these strategies and Dempsey and Millan's artwork and suggests the value of coding in these circumstances; but first, an overview of the artists' tribulations is needed to provide context to the tourism campaign.

### **A festival of controversy**

Dempsey and Millan are no strangers to controversial artwork. Through diverse media including video, stage performance and magazine, their past works have exposed female sexuality, lesbian experience, and gender inequities in employment, fashion, romance, and gay culture. From a performance video called *We're Talking Vulva*, in which Dempsey dresses up in a body-sized vulva costume and raps about topics from safe sex to masturbation, to a magazine spread called *A Day in the Life of a Bull Dyke*, which traces a blossoming romance between a woman and a "butch" butcher (Millan), the artists' work is feminist and subversive. They explain that their art is about rewriting popular culture and creating better endings for marginalized women, and their creative



Figure 2

process is to “start with a visual concept and put it together with something that has been bothering us, a puzzle or problem” (quoted in Heald 1998: 82).

Dempsey and Millan developed the “One Gay City” campaign as an exhibit for a four-week photographic art festival in October 1997 called *Utopial Dystopia, approaching the new millennium*, sponsored by Floating Gallery, a non-profit art centre in Winnipeg that displays unconventional photography in “floating” venues throughout the city. Floating Gallery planned to feature thirteen photographic displays during the festival which explored utopias and dystopias in cultural contexts. Many of the displays were considered political; others, such as Dempsey and Millan’s, were downright controversial. The “One Gay City” campaign was deemed *too* controversial, in fact, to be displayed in the format for which it was originally intended.

The roots of this controversy can be traced in part to the artists’ five campaign objectives: 1. to critique the absence of gay people in advertising; 2. to critique homophobia generally; 3. to positively present an alternative reality experienced by 10 per cent of the population; 4. to help build the utopia being illustrated in the campaign images; and (most playfully) 5. to propose a solution to the ills of Winnipeg’s local economy: gay tourism (Dempsey and Millan 1997). To achieve these objectives, Dempsey and Millan planned to position their campaign in literal high-traffic areas of the city; the “One Gay City” images were intended for display as bus shelter ads on some of Winnipeg’s main thoroughfares.

When three of the city’s media outlets learned of the bus shelter ads and brought them to the public’s attention, reaction was mixed. Some supported the artists’ efforts; others said they would stop taking the bus, or, in one extreme instance, blow up bus shelters if the images appeared. This homophobic reaction was strong enough to convince Mediacom, the agency that books billboard and bus shelter space in Winnipeg, to refer the campaign to its parent office in Toronto for evaluation. In turn, the parent office turned the matter to the Canadian Advertising Council to determine whether the posters complied with the Canadian Code of Advertising Standards. The Canadian Advertising Council ruled that the images were artwork, not advertising, and as such could not be displayed in advertising space. Mediacom therefore decided Dempsey and Millan’s work could not be turned into bus shelter ads, but they did indicate to the artists that their campaign would be reconsidered if text was added to make the images advertisements.



Figure 3

Unfazed by Mediacom's decision to not display the "One *Gay* City" images, Dempsey and Millan turned their work into postcards, and passed supplies to gay-friendly shops in Winnipeg and Toronto to sell for one dollar each. They also added advertising text to the images to make them into ads. The redesigned images included the tagline: "For more information about this gay paradise, call (Dempsey and Millan's work phone number). Support Visual Arts in Manitoba." They then returned their work to Mediacom for reconsideration, but found the agency was reluctant to re-evaluate it; Dempsey's phone calls and faxes went unreturned for weeks. When she eventually did contact a representative from the agency, she was told that Mediacom could still not display the campaign because the "One *Gay* City" slogan was a violation of the city's copyrighted "One Great City" slogan. At this point, Dempsey and Millan began to strongly suspect the reason their campaign was being rejected had more to do with homophobia and a desire to avoid negative publicity, than advertising and copyright laws.

Certainly, the artists are no strangers to homophobic response. Public reaction to the "One *Gay* City" campaign is reminiscent of the controversy sparked by Dempsey and Millan's 1993 "Mary Medusa" piece. In this performance, Dempsey — wearing a Medusa wig of plastic snakes and a black leotard — recites poetry about how a "woman out of control is a frightening thing," and ends her performance by squishing chocolate cake between her legs. In North American culture, where control of women's appetites for food and sex is linked to their conventional position as domestic labourers in heterosexual relationships, "Mary Medusa" posed a threat to heterosexual assumptions (Greenhill 1998), as did the images of the "One *Gay* City" campaign, albeit in a more overt way.

At the time of publication, the "One *Gay* City" controversy has escalated to involve the Human Rights Commission and a lawyer representing Dempsey and Millan's case. The artists believe their work is being discriminated against on homophobic grounds, and Mediacom is refusing to display the campaign in fear that its gay-positive messages will be connected to the agency itself. Dempsey and Millan point to other controversial advertisements the agency displays on billboards and bus shelters, including an anti-choice advertisement with the caption, "Abortion Stops A Beating Heart," as evidence that Mediacom's refusal to display their campaign is rooted in homophobia. Public reaction to the case continues to be mixed as well. Some see the campaign as a clever wordplay, noting the double meaning of the word "gay," while others



view it as a threatening attack on the “great” (and not “gay”) city of Winnipeg, and question the use of Manitoba imagery to promote the province as the “gay heart of the continent” as the back of each postcard reads. I believe these reactions are in part due to viewers’ responses to the four coding strategies Dempsey and Millan employ in their campaign: appropriation, juxtaposition, distraction and trivialization. I will explore each in turn.

## Appropriation

Appropriation is a coding strategy that involves “adapting to feminist purposes forms or materials normally associated with male culture” (Radner and Lanser 1993: 10) and reclaiming that which has traditionally belonged exclusively in the masculine sphere. For the purposes of my analysis, I will extend this definition of appropriation to include both male-to-female perspectives (i.e. male culture appropriated to female ends) and female-to-male perspectives (i.e. female culture appropriated to male ends). Through this extended definition, appropriation can be found in all three postcards: the Golden Boy represents a male appropriating female culture, the fisherwoman represents a female appropriating male culture, and the birthday girl represents an androgynous child appropriating *both* cultures. The message this coding strategy brings to the campaign is clear; one’s gender is not necessarily the same as one’s sex, and vice-versa.

The Golden Boy model, for example, is clearly satirizing the landmark Winnipeg statue, which is a male form. However, he is also appropriating the stereotypical *female* form with his long, well-groomed hair and smooth, hairless body. His nakedness and objectifying pose could also be interpreted as modes of female appropriation, since most naked models are women. It is difficult, in fact, to perceive this model as anything other than a gay icon because he appears to be more an object than a man. Male signifiers, such as body hair and a penis, are missing from the image. As a result, the model’s gender becomes ambiguous.

The fisherwoman is more of a real person, but falls short of being a (stereotypical) real woman. She appears to possess predominantly masculine characteristics, and appropriates male culture through her clothing (rugged and outdoorsy), her rosy cheeks (from being outside), her pastime or occupation (fishing), her pride (evidenced through her smile), and her air of independence. She has made her way into male culture, and impresses upon viewers that she does not need a man. She can catch her own supper! Her position within male

culture is secured by the manner in which she appears to have transcended economic dependence upon men by engaging in a man's occupation. It has been noted that men's jobs are distinct from women's jobs as the former are usually full-time, well-paying and secure while that latter are part-time, low-paying and transitory (Lynn and Todoroff 1995). Judging by the model's pride in her catch, she clearly positions herself in the first category. She becomes even more subversive when viewers consider that her occupation is part of the male-dominated primary economic sector — the agriculture, mining, forestry and fishing industries — and that she is Metis (Dempsey 1998, personal communication). Lynn and Todoroff note that Aboriginal women have traditionally had restricted access to the paid labour force; in 1986 only four in ten Aboriginal women participated there.

The image of the birthday girl is more complex, as the child is appropriating both female and male culture, suggesting androgyny or a blend of two sexualities. On one hand, the child is highly feminine. She is wearing a pink dress and sparkly crown with a matching pink heart, her nails are painted, her hair is brushed, her birthday cake is served on a pink tray with a lacy doily underneath, and she is wearing that all-important feminine accessory — a smile. Smiles typically demonstrate friendliness and lack of harmful intent, and females are more frequently pictured smiling than males because “it is they who have to appease men” (Farran 1990: 266). On the other hand, the birthday girl's femininity is challenged by her obvious delight with the plastic toy boats and trains that decorate the cake, which hint at a boyish side to her personality. The toys contradict the femininity her appearance represents. She seems so ultra-feminine, viewers expect to see tiny ballerinas decorating her cake, not engine-powered modes of transportation.

### **Juxtaposition**

Juxtaposition occurs when the “ironic arrangement of texts, artifacts or performances ... that in one environment seem unremarkable or unambiguous... develop quite tendentious levels of meaning in another” (Radner and Lanser 1993: 13). It blends with appropriation, but is distinct because it requires that viewers undergo a switch of mentality when they see the text — in this case, the postcards — in light of its juxtaposition to a heterosexual reading.

The birthday girl postcard is a strong example of juxtaposition. While viewers would likely think of the child in the postcard as a girl, it is possible to perceive her as a boy dressed in girls' clothing. Her face is naturally androgynous,

as are most four year-olds' (Dempsey 1998, personal communication), and her hairstyle is fairly unisex. The only real markers the viewer has to guess at her sex are her clothing and nailpolish, which, if switched with a T-shirt, overalls and baseball cap, could easily make her a "boy." Viewing the birthday girl as birthday boy gives the postcard new and controversial meanings, as it suddenly involves a child cross-dressing to a drag queen (or perhaps more appropriately, drag *princess*) extent. Indeed, the child's flowery dress, sparkly crown and shiny nailpolish seem like an over-the-top appropriation of femininity — a look not uncommon among drag queens.

The postcard also becomes controversial in this new light because it suggests someone has consciously dressed the "boy" in girls' clothing. This is worrisome to most people in a hetero-normative culture that dictates girls should be dressed as girls, and boys should be dressed as boys. It also assigns sexuality to the child. Did someone dress the child this way or did s/he dress her/himself? Either idea puts viewers in the potentially uncomfortable position of seeing the child as a sexual being and having to assign a non-hetero sexuality to her/him. Of course, this controversy is trivialized by the fact the picture is set up and posed, and is not a snapshot from an actual birthday party. Homophobes could perhaps take comfort in Judith Butler's belief that dressing in drag is a performance and not, as she notes, the true "putting on" of a gender that properly belongs to another group. Yet Butler herself would argue that *all* gender is display, which each of us must perform:

Drag constitutes the way in which genders are appropriated, theatricalized, worn, and done; it implies that all gendering is a kind of impersonation or approximation. If this is true, it seems, there is no original or primary gender that drag imitates, but *gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original* (Butler 1989: 306).

The postcard's caption, "Where every child can grow up to be *whoever* they want to be!" also supports juxtaposition. The wording does not impose a sex or gender on the child, which contributes to viewer uncertainty about who/what the child "really" is. The audience is left with a choice; they can focus on the girlish pink dress and sparkly crown, or they can look at the boyish toy boats and cars in trying to assign a gender to the child. Similarly, viewers have a choice with the word "gay" in the "One *Gay* City" caption: they can apply the "queer" meaning of the word, or choose from a range of less controversial definitions offered by the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*: 1. lighthearted and carefree; 2. characterized by cheerfulness or pleasure; or 3. brightly coloured; showy; and brilliant.

## Distraction

Distraction is defined as a coding strategy used to “drown out or draw attention away from the subversive power of a feminist message” (Radner and Lanser 1993: 15) and usually involves creating some kind of “noise” to distract the audience from the message’s intensity. The main form of noise Dempsey and Millan have employed in their campaign is humour. It is difficult to take the postcards absolutely seriously, even though they contain powerful lesbian and gay rights messages. The Golden Boy, for example, is such an exaggerated gay stereotype that some viewers cannot help but laugh. The expression on the model’s face is more humorous than sexual, and his rigid yet naked pose is hard to look at with a *straight* face. The fisherwoman is not as outright humorous, but is amusing when viewers see the sparkle in the model’s eye and take the caption into consideration. The fishing reference is a coded term for lesbianism, as insider viewers or people who have seen the movie *Go Fish* would likely recognize. (Of course, it is possible “outsider” viewers would not see the woman as a lesbian stereotype, because lesbians are often rendered invisible by male culture as patriarchy defines heterosexuality as the norm and lesbianism as the exception (Rich 1993).) The birthday girl postcard relies on an even more subtle form of humour. Here, the potential for laughs lies in the comfort level of the viewer, who must look a little closer to “get” the message. That message is distracted, of course, by the unthreatening smile on the young child’s face.

While all three postcards could be experienced as humorous, they also contain elements that balance their lightheartedness with seriousness. Homophobes would not find much humour in the “One *Gay* City” tagline at the bottom of each postcard, for example, because it suggests everyone, including the homophobic viewer, is homosexual. Similarly, the caption on the back of each postcard, “Winnipeg: the gay heart of the continent” could be offensive to some, as could the name of Dempsey and Millan’s production company — “Finger in the Dyke” — which suggests to viewers that they are looking at lesbian-created art.

According to William Leap’s theory of Gay English, it is unlikely viewers would *not* connect the language of the postcards with gay culture. He argues that language contributes to the exchange and retention of gay culture, and that gay men (and, I would add, lesbians) share common approaches to talking, listening, and using metaphor and imagery in their language to disclose their sexuality. Gay English operates from a specific set of grammar and

discourse rules which dictate there be an overlap in reference from one statement to the next, and that overlapping statements gradually narrow in the direction of gay-specific themes. This progression is evident in Dempsey and Millan's postcards as the artists move from the potentially innocent "One *Gay* City" to the less subdued "Winnipeg — the gay heart of the continent" to the outright explicit "Finger in the Dyke." Nonetheless, strategies of distraction are at play (at work?) in the postcards as seriousness is balanced with humour in an effort to "maximize gains" and "minimize losses":

When speakers of Gay English describe language choice they place more emphasis on the likelihood that such conditions will continue to be open ended and ambiguous than they do on the uncertainty present in a particular setting at any one point in time. Needed, then, are discourse strategies which will enable them to maximize gains (confirmation of gay identity) and minimize losses (unwarranted disclosure of gender interests, heterosexual backlash and homophobia) (Leap 1993: 57).

The use of ambiguous, open-ended language as a discourse strategy is found in the postcards' captions, which can be interpreted in more than one way through the artists' final coding strategy — trivialization.

### Trivialization

Trivialization is the "employment of a form, mode, or genre that the dominant culture considers unimportant, innocuous or irrelevant" (Radner and Lanser 1993: 19). A message that has been trivialized tends to be discounted or overlooked, especially if it is presented in a non-threatening format. Trivialization is the most prevalent coding strategy in the "One *Gay* City" campaign, and is apparent in the postcards' subjects, captions, slogan, colours, clarity and form.

Humour and lightheartedness are the main ways the postcards' queer messages are trivialized. As Dempsey and Millan explain in their artists' statement — which constructs the general public as non-queer — "One of the main tools (we) employ is humour. It throws the viewer off-balance...(and) makes the viewer laugh. Hopefully, in this moment of laughter, the public who passes the "Winnipeg: One *Gay* City!" ads, or sends or receives them in the mail, will have their reality shifted" (Dempsey and Millan 1997).

The subjects in the Golden Boy and fisherwoman postcards are trivialized because they work from stereotypes. The Golden Boy looks stereotypically

gay, with his pursed lips and hairless body, and the fisherwoman looks stereotypically butch as she subscribes closely to the lesbian “costume” of “short hair, no make-up, denim overalls, flannel shirts (and) hiking boots” (Faderman 1992: 40). These stereotypical looks may elicit laughter from (non-queer) viewers, who can distance themselves from the postcard models. This laughter would likely be lost, however, had the artists used more conventional imagery, such as a picture of a man in a suit and a woman in a dress. The postcard of the little girl is more alarming. She is dressed in stereotypically feminine clothing, which could be perceived as “normal” by heterosexual viewers, but she crosses the gender line by taking delight in the masculine toy boats and train cars that decorate her cake. This contradiction could be problematic to homophobes as it suggests the child is adopting, or at least considering, a non-traditional gender role. At the same time, the message is trivialized (but perhaps coded as more significant?) because children, and especially young girls, are rarely perceived as threatening.

The postcards’ captions are also trivialized, particularly the Golden Boy’s “Where everyone is *light* in the loafers!” The “light in the loafers” saying is often used to label gay men, and may therefore strike a chord with viewers who have uttered the phrase themselves. The expression is also humorous in the context of the postcard because the Golden Boy model is light in colour (his skin is golden), and light in weight (with one foot off the ground, he appears almost ready to float away). The humorous intent of the caption is also reinforced by the fact the model is *not* wearing any loafers. There is also a *double entendre* in the fisherwoman’s “Where the *fishing* is great!” caption. Here, Dempsey and Millan use wordplay to make their message less threatening; viewers can think of the woman as “fishing” for more than just dinner, or, if they are closed-minded, can choose to interpret the postcard in an “innocent” (i.e. non-lesbian) way. The use of wordplay in these postcards serves two purposes: to trivialize the campaign’s messages, and to reclaim words and expressions for the queer community.

The artists also lighten the postcards’ messages through the vibrant colours they employ, and the sharp focus of the images. The cloudy blue sky background suggests warm, care-free summer days, and the bright colours of each postcard — the gold skin of the Golden Boy, the red parka of the fisherwoman, and the pink dress of the birthday girl — invite viewers to look at them. These attractive shades trivialize the hatred and anger of homophobia, which could have been more harshly portrayed in colours typically associated with these emotions, such as black. The postcards invert the philosophical tradition of dualism that

divides the world into opposites (white/black, good/bad, man/woman etc.) and sees the first element in each dichotomy as better than the second. Dempsey and Millan's artwork disconnects heterosexuality from lightness and purity, and non-hetero behavior from darkness and corruption. On the contrary, the postcards' bright colours and sharply focused images let viewers feel they are connecting with the postcard models, which trivializes the reality that homophobic people do *not* connect with lesbians and gay men.

Finally, the format of the artwork lightens its messages. Postcards are rarely viewed as serious artwork; instead, they are considered kitschy and associated with tacky tourist paraphernalia. Their price suggests they are of low value, and this perception is reinforced by the way recipients treat them. Postcards are not usually displayed in places where "real" artwork would appear, and instead are hung on corkboards or fridges, filed away in a drawer or thrown out. The value of postcards is not considered intrinsic either, as recipients usually associate the worth of the card with the person who sends it. Dempsey and Millan's tourism campaign is therefore trivialized through its format, which occupies a less public space than would the bus shelter ads. Presumably, viewers consume the "One *Gay* City" postcards in a private rather than public setting, which assigns a less controversial status to the images, as well. From a liberal perspective, materials consumed within the privacy of one's home are considered unproblematic while materials displayed in the public sphere are of greater concern because they stand to harm the public at large (Segal 1993). This private/public split would seem to render the postcards harmless, but the violent reaction some Winnipeg citizens had toward the campaign and resistance by Medicom suggests viewers were responding to its coded elements.

## Evaluation?

Evaluating the "One *Gay* City" campaign is a tricky task because, as Dempsey and Millan note, it is still a work in progress. At the time of publication the artists continue to fight the case despite the fact they feel tired and do not foresee closure in the near future (Millan 1999, personal communication). Nevertheless, a review of the artists' objectives in relation to the campaign suggests it was a success even though it did not appear in its intended bus shelter ad format. They achieved their objectives with the postcards by: 1. criticizing the absence of gay people in advertising by depicting a gay man, lesbian woman and to-be-determined child; 2. attacking homophobia by reclaiming language that has traditionally been used against the queer

community; 3. recognizing — and even celebrating, especially through the birthday girl postcard — Winnipeg's gay and lesbian population; 4. constructing the city as a gay paradise by depicting it as a queer tourist attraction; and 5. proposing a playful solution to the ills of Winnipeg's local economy: gay tourism. These objectives were met through the strategic use of appropriation, juxtaposition, distraction and trivialization — not to protect the artists from the consequences of their statements but as a playful yet telling expression of queer and lesbian culture.

But what of the fact the campaign was displayed in postcard rather than bus shelter ad format? Perhaps this point is moot in the final analysis, as the format of the campaign has become less important than its outcome. Ironically, the "One *Gay* City" campaign was perhaps *more* successful because Mediacom tried to suppress it, for the roadblocks the agency constructed resulted in a heated public discussion and ongoing media attention. The importance of this discussion does not escape the artists, who have fueled the controversy for the past year and a half even though they believe it may no longer be appropriate to display the images in Winnipeg bus shelters. With the recent election of Glen Murray as Winnipeg's — indeed Canada's — first openly gay mayor, Dempsey and Millan are concerned this work will be connected to the mayor and homophobic backlash will ensue. Their next step, then, is to investigate the possibility of displaying the campaign in other Canadian cities, with the underlying objective of keeping public discussion alive. Certainly, there is no shortage of discussion topics around the campaign, for in the process of decoding the images, viewers engage in a que(e)rying of the artists, the artwork, themselves, and finally "Winnipeg: One *Gay* City!" It is a process which, as Radner and Lanser suggest, could ultimately lead to liberation:

If the production of coded messages is a sign of oppression and censorship, the deciphering of such messages may be the very process through which liberation becomes possible (Radner and Lanser 1993: 3).



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