Along the Cow Path: Technical Communication Within a Jewish Cemetery

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ABSTRACT
Technical communication and user experience studies traditionally uphold Western onto-epistemological distinctions between technical users and objects. Recent calls for the inclusion of cultural approaches to technical communication, however, have asked scholars to consider the influence cultural knowledge has on communication design. This article takes up these calls by reading technical documentation through new materialist and Indigenous ways of knowing. Using a prominent Jewish cemetery in Gainesville, Florida as a case study, this article treats technical artifacts and subjects as co-constitutive, arguing for the cultural and material agency of technical documentation design in mediating and shaping user experience.

INTRODUCTION
On August 27, 1871, twenty year old Abraham Pinkussoun died and was buried in what would become one of the oldest Jewish cemeteries in the state of Florida: an area “along a ‘cow path some distance from the nearest dirt road,’” according to local Jewish historian Samuel Proctor (cited in “History of B’nai Israel Cemetery,” 2015). Aside from transcribed oral history about when Abraham died and where he is buried (see “Gainesville’s Jewish Cemetery,” 2015; Lowenstein, 2013; Proctor, 1990), little is known about him.

What is presently known about Abraham may be abstracted from two technical documents. The first is Alachua County’s 1870 census record. At the time, Abraham was nineteen years old and working as a clerk in the dry goods section of his father Pinkus Pinkussoun’s grocery store (“United States Census, 1870,” 1870). This piece of technical documentation notes that Abraham was born in New York, the oldest of ten children, White, not enrolled in school, and eligible to vote. Whatever else may (at least for now) be known about Abraham comes from his headstone. Abraham’s marker is the first gravestone in the B’nai Israel Cemetery, an acre of land Pinkus and a man named Gerson Joseph originally purchased and named the “Gainesville Jewish Cemetery.”

The Gainesville Jewish Cemetery serviced the two-dozen Jewish families living in Gainesville, Florida, in 1871, half of which (including the Pinkussouns) relocated elsewhere by 1880 (“History of B’nai Israel Cemetery,” 2015). Despite not belonging to a Jewish congregation, the cemetery became the resting spot for many of Abraham’s contemporaries. In 1946, the cemetery was tied to a congregation in Gainesville when the “district court officially transferred its supervision to the trustees of B’nai Israel” (“History of B’nai Israel Cemetery”), a local Conservative synagogue. Today, the cemetery’s property line has expanded to include some 300 remains as well as the Gainesville Holocaust Memorial. While we do not know with certainty how accessible the original cemetery was for Gainesville’s Jewish community, the present-day B’nai Israel Cemetery has grown into a space reserved for Gainesville’s Jewish population through technical, bilingual (i.e., Hebrew and English) documentation design.
While technical communication is broadly understood as the production and/or study of specialized documents, cultural approaches to technical communication are increasingly being incorporated into the field. In their article “Interfacing Cultural Rhetorics: A History and a Call” (2018), Cobos et al. posit that cultural rhetorics is intimately connected to how scholars make cultural interventions in fields like technical communication:

[W]e posit that rhetorical inquiry often treats culture as an object (or context), as a process (or assemblage), or some combination of the two. In relation to these interfaces, scholars often locate culture in terms of language, identity, custom, religion, or other forms of social organization and/or distribution. (p. 141)

Technical communicator and cultural rhetorician Angela M. Haas further characterizes these social organizations and distributions in her contribution to the article as “material and information flows within the network(s)” of technical communication (p. 146). Haas suggests that technical documents are cultural objects energized within material and informational assemblages or communicative networks. More specifically, Haas pushes technical communicators to engage in rhetoric or the negotiation of cultural information and values to make explicit how “subjectivities, positionalities, and commitments to particular knowledge systems are interrelated and situated within networks of power and geopolitical landbases” (p. 145). A cultural approach to technical communication, in other words, has the potential to widen the spaces in which technical communication emerges, a central tenet of this article.

Following Cobos et al.’s call to recognize cultural rhetorics’ contributions to our disciplinary research and practices as well as Angela M. Haas’s push to explore the potential of using cultural rhetoric frameworks in promoting different arenas of knowledge, I propose treating cemeteries as important sites of technical communication. Cemeteries are generally treated as spaces that accumulate technical documents (e.g., gravestones or memorials) designed to circulate information about a cultural community and their loved ones over time (see Yancey, 2018; Wright, 2005). Because technical communication and documentation are culturally informed meaning-making processes (Jones, 2016; Evia & Patriarca, 2012; Selfe & Selfe, 1994), technical documentation design and function vary within cemeteries created by different cultural groups. As spaces made from the assemblage of different cultural and material documents, cemeteries circulate technical information through the material and symbolic or rhetorical mediation of visitor activity while interfacing specific cultural registers. We might look to the B’nai Israel Cemetery’s front gates to catch a glimpse of this process.

Both entrances to the B’nai Israel Cemetery are held shut by a lock whose combination is inscribed onto a nearby sign, represented by the repetition of the English transliteration of the Hebrew word for “life,” chai. The sign, placed just above the lock, mediates visitor activity by asking visitors to first mentally represent the word chai in Hebrew before swapping each letter with its respective numerical value and adding the two together (Figure 1).

Visitors hoping to open the lock need to draw on an accessible reservoir of cultural and/or linguistic knowledge, namely that: (a) chai is the English transliteration of the Hebrew word for “life,” (b) chai is written in Hebrew as “חי,” read from right to left, (c) each letter in the Hebrew alphabet has a numerical value, (d) the first letter cheth or “ח” has a value of eight, (e) the second letter yod or “י” has a value of ten, and (f) a word’s numerical value is the sum of its parts. As a piece of technical documentation, the sign mediates visitor activity and shapes user experience by physically commanding visual attention and directing finger movements while also guiding the symbolic activity needed to interpret the lock’s combination. The sign excludes certain populations from entering the cemetery, namely those visitors who cannot read Hebrew and/or do not have the appropriate cultural knowledge or experience to know that chai is eighteen. Because Abraham Pinkussoun’s death was the catalyst for the creation of Gainesville’s Jewish Cemetery, a place designed to meet the needs of Gainesville’s Jewish community, we might ask as technical communicators how Abraham’s voice continues to reverberate through the cemetery’s material and symbolic textuality. What does it mean to read gravestones as material objects of technical communication invested with an individual or public’s memory?

My aim in this article is to explore how Abraham Pinkussoun’s memory is crystallized in the material composition and layout of Gainesville’s B’nai Israel Cemetery. Cemeteries as spaces of remembrance are important cultural sites within many Jewish communities, stemming from two broad cultural topoi: memory and justice (tzedek). Memory in the Jewish rhetorical tradition entails ensuring that the past is embedded in the present l’dor v’dor (“from generation to generation”). As Bernard-Donals and Fernheimer (2014) explain in the introduction to their book Jewish Rhetorics: History, Theory, Practice, memory creates a sense of “to-ness” by helping to “forge bonds between individuals and communities while also preserving and protecting differences among individuals and communities (Yerushalmi)” (p. xv). Engaging with broad and localized Jewish memories in the present strengthens an individual’s bond to their cultural community while, simultaneously, ensuring that the dead are not forgotten. Within the context of a Jewish cemetery, tzedek may be achieved by ensuring that the deceased are not disconnected from our community.

Due to the incredible role cemeteries have in preserving memory and ensuring an individual and community’s history is ethically represented, I find it important to note that I do not belong to the synagogue that manages the B’nai Israel Cemetery. As such, I intend to only focus on publicly available documentation within or about the cemetery. By practicing standard observational qualitative research methods while embodying Jewish values and practices in a space open to any Jewish visitor, I hope to both honor and learn
from Gainesville’s historical and contemporary Jewish community. At the same, I intend to share a model for understanding how non-Western, culturally rooted ways of thinking and being expand traditional understandings of how technical documents engage with or influence technical users.

This article has four parts. I begin the article by detailing my theoretical framework, taking an interdisciplinary approach to technical communication by weaving together conversations surrounding user experience and intra-activity. Afterward, I discuss how technical documentation mediates human activity within cemeteries, suggesting that gravestones are culturally networked multimodal objects of technical communication. In the third section, I rhetorically analyze B’nai Israel Cemetery’s technical documentation through a user experience and cultural rhetorics approach to technical communication. I then conclude this article by discussing the implications of my work in further explicating the relationship between technical communication and cultural rhetorics.

**USER-EXPERIENCE AND INTRACTIVITY**

Because we are interested in how cultural documentation design illuminates the ways in which the Gainesville Jewish Cemetery might have met the Pinkussoun family and their community’s needs, this article is heavily informed by user experience studies. User experience, a field often connected to technical communication, emphasizes evaluating technical objects by comparing their intended and actualized usages (Rose et al., 2017; Campbell et al., 2016; Sun, 2006). Although user experience methods and methodologies are often tied to the processes behind an object’s design (Rose et al., 2017; Campbell et al., 2016), technical communication scholars like Huatong Sun (2006) contend that users are themselves designers who, through a process she calls “user localization,” engage with objects in potentially subversive manners to meet their rhetorical needs (p. 458–459). As she explains in her article, “The Triumph of Users: Achieving Cultural Usability and User Localization” (2006), a product’s usability originates from “tool-mediated production and sign-mediated communication. It [usability] is both (a) a material interaction with the artifact and its contexts and (b) an interpretation process of this activity” (Sun, p. 466). A technical artifact’s usability is therefore always under negotiation as users engage the artifact materially and symbolically to meet their localized needs.

Underlying Sun’s (2006) approach to user experience is the notion that technical artifacts contain social and material energy. Discussing mobile messaging technology, Sun observes that information technology products are not usable when their designs are not informed by “postadoption user experience at the users’ sites” (p. 477). In other words, an object’s materiality has the potential to shape, enhance, and/or limit how users rhetorically interact with the object through meaning-making processes like mobile text messaging. Similarly, as a technology for storing, retrieving, and sharing information, burial plots—like the one pictured in Figure 2—guide a user’s experience with the deceased through the culturally informed arrangement of cemetery objects.

A user’s experience with the burial plot pictured above principally begins with and is, therefore, guided by the material arrangement of three objects: a headstone, footstone, and plot fence. The arrangement of Alfred Simonson’s headstone and footstone show users how the deceased’s body is positioned, information that might have been important to the Simonson family if they believed, as the prominent Jewish philosopher Moses ben Maimonides and others since have reasoned, that “the soul resides in the recesses of the brain, flows through the blood, and so reaches the various parts of the body” (Mizrahi, 2011). Knowing or even addressing where the soul was chiefly seated might have been significant for the family, hinting at the potential relationships users form with technical information when it is situated within a cultural framework. Some mourners engaging with the brick fencing, for example, might see it only as a way of preventing visitors from walking atop the deceased or to prevent heavy rains from uneartling the grave. Mourners with a larger pool of Judaic religious and cultural knowledge, however, might see the fencing as a signpost for the Kohens, individuals who, because of their ancestral relationship to the sons of Aaron, are prohibited from coming within a certain distance of the deceased (see Sefaria, Leviticus 21:1). Alfred’s plot is rhetorical because, to use George A. Kennedy’s (1992) language, its material composition can “be identified with the energy inherent in communication,” namely the “energy level coded in the message” (p. 2). Just as the energy coded into a plant’s “coloration and scent” rhetorically attract or repel animals (p. 10), the cultural energy coded into the organization of the objects pictured in Figure 2 connect user experience to material assemblages.

**Figure 2: Alfred Simonson’s (1859 – 1881) burial plot in the B’nai Israel Cemetery. The image on the right is an up-close photo of his headstone, which reads: “רותם" / ALFRED SIMONSON / DIED / MARCH 18, 1881 / AGED / 22 YEARS.”**

The term “assemblage” as used here refers to the idea that the “agency of human subjects is dispersed and/or dissipated across a network of actors and things” (Dillon, 2013, p. 174). Material objects have the ability to act on or with human bodies in ways that are co-constitutive (Dillon, 2013; Bennett, 2010; Barad, 2007, 2003). Our agency or ability to act as technical communicators arises from what feminist physicist Karen Barad (2003) calls “agential cuts” or momentarily stabilized moments of “intra-activity” (p. 815), a term that acknowledges the “ontological inseparability” of objects and describes an ongoing co-constitutive relationship in which objects and activity are produced (Barad, 2007, p. 128). Intra-activity, in other words, is a phenomenon that produces human and non-human objects as well as human and non-human agents through their assemblage or material entanglement. Agential cuts and intra-activity are symptomatic of agential realism or the ontological position that “individuals do not preexist their interactions; rather, individuals emerge through and as part of their entangled intra-relating” (Barad, 2007, p. ix). A user’s intra-action with cemetery objects like headstones and footstones creates an agential cut in which culturally informed symbolic and material phenomena is produced in the form of grieving and remembrance. It is through...
this phenomenon or intra-activity that technical communicators become mourners and information technologies become grave markers. Aligning with Indigenous modes of thinking and being that consider the agency of matter (see Ríos, 2015), agential realism positions technical documentation as mediators of user experience, acknowledging a technical artifact’s potential to act in a co-constitutive and communicative manner.

The desire to see material objects as having intra-active agency can presently be found in scholarship on technical literacy, the rhetorical processes of interpretation and communication behind a technical document’s usability. For instance, Gabriela Raquel Ríos (2015) argues for the value of embodied knowledge in acts of interpretation and communication through agricultural practices. Ríos’s work on what she calls “land-based literacies and rhetorics” (p. 60) opens the possibility of seeing farming tools like hoes and shovels as important actors in the process of attaining literacy. More strikingly, Angela M. Haas (2007) observes that the technology woven into wampum belts—Indigenous, non-alphabetic technologies for recording and retelling narratives—has “communicative agency, as with the colors of the shells and the design patterns” (p. 91). A wampum belt’s material composition and symbolic design constitute its communicative potential, suggesting that the intra-action between an object’s individual parts shape user experiences in ways that enable technical documentation to act or communicate through the mediation of human activity.

Haas’s observation is particularly useful for thinking about how the different elements of a cemetery plot mediate user experience. We might, for example, see the placement of the surname “RESNICK” between the headstones pictured in Figure 3 as creating a visual and symbolic linkage between the deceased and the Resnick family.

The placement of a divot sporting a Star of David invites viewers to recall the cultural significance of the yahrtzeit candle—a candle lit in memory of a deceased individual—before possibly prompting them to leave a lighted candle behind, regardless of whether or not that is the object’s intended usage. After all, with the appropriate cultural knowledge needed to know that flowers are not typically left behind at Jewish graves, users might reasonably localize the divot’s design to meet their cultural needs. Each of these agential cuts creates technological subjects (i.e., mourners) and technical documents (i.e., headstones) within a cultural framework. A gravestone’s communicative potential as a technical document within a cemetery plot stems from its culturally informed material mediation of user experience.

![Figure 3: Frederick and Irene Resnick’s joint plot in the B’nai Israel Cemetery. Each tablet features the deceased’s respective Hebrew name and ends with his or her role as a member of the Resnick family. In the center is a candleholder marked with the Star of David.](image)

TECHNICAL DOCUMENTATION AS TECHNICAL/TEXTUAL MEDIATION

Drawing from Sun’s (2006) definition of articulation as “a process of creating connections between various contextual factors on the level of practices and on the level of meanings” (p. 463), I view mediation as a process through which technical documentation intra-acts with users to produce and sustain cultural and communicative activity. Mediation in this sense is guided by a user’s experience with technological artifacts in specific cultural contexts. As cultural rhetoricians Ellen Cushman and Shreelina Ghosh (2012) explain,

[Mediation] is the place where people act within structures, where these actors’ dispositions both follow and lay the tracks of organized behavior…and where micro material realities and practices meet the macro of stabilized behaviors. Mediation—central and necessary to the practices that unfold in these spaces of stabilized behavior—can be understood as both sign technology use and enactment of stabilized behavior at once. (p. 267–268)

Discussing the digitalization of the Cherokee stomp dance and classical Indian dance, Cushman and Ghosh discern that mediation influences people, activities, and objects through “sign technologies or representational tools” and the material embodiment of cultural or social behaviors and practices (pp. 266, 267). An embodied “process and product of meaning making…located in time and space” (p. 267), our definition of mediation follows a similar logic: through their material entanglement, technical objects and users both embody and create material cultural artifacts and behaviors. Within the context of cemeteries, headstones mediate user activity to produce embodied cultural practices, such as the Judaic practice of leaving stones rather than flowers atop graves to—as the common abbreviated inscription “ת נ צ ב ה” on headstones would suggest—“bound the soul in the bonds of eternal life” or prevent their memory from being forgotten. In turn, the act of leaving stones atop grave markers sustains the technical document’s communicative potential.

The idea that technical documentation has the potential to mediate physical and symbolic activity is not at all new to technical communication studies. Johnson, Pimentel, and Pimentel (2008) contend that the New Mexico Bureau of Immigration used pamphlets and other technical documents to distort Indigenous oral histories in ways that appealed to White settlers, allowing the bureau to seize ownership of Indigenous New Mexican history to promote immigration (pp. 211–212). Similarly, Dragga and Voss (2001) consider how technical illustrations might better “promote a humanized and humanizing understanding of technical subjects,” touching on how visual communication mediates readers’ humanistic understanding of graphical information (p. 266). But, because materialism shifts our “attention away from individuals and onto actants in assemblages” (Bennett, 2010, p. 42) such that individuals do not pre-exist material intra-actions, we need to expand previous understandings of technical mediation by situating technical communication within a cultural network of material agents.

Borrowing from social network theory, an interdisciplinary field of study dedicated to mapping social relationships, a “network” is used here to denote a system of intra-activity or “ties” between spatially situated “nodes” or cultural actors (see Grandjean, 2016; Grunspan, Wiggins, & Goodreau, 2014; Freeman, 1978/79). The extent to
which these objects are in communication may be seen as relating to the notion of “betweenness centrality,” the idea that the strength of a node’s position in a system or network can be determined by measuring its distance from one or more nodes (Grunspan, Wiggins, & Goodreau, 2014, p. 170). Rather than using spatial distances to measure the intensity of communication between two or more human or non-human agents, a more dynamic approach is to evaluate cultural connections or cultural distances between nodes. As hypertextual networks, wampum belts remind us that materialized cultural connections are what enable technical objects to communicate embodied information. Describing wampum belts’ rhetorical materiality, Haas (2007) explains that a wampum belt’s nodes and pathways between nodes are readable only to individuals who can understand each node’s cultural significance: “The color usage of wampum reminds its ‘reader’ how to organize and read the story woven into the material rhetoric…In order to retrieve the encoded communication, an individual must be a part of the community with the cultural context for accurate retrieval of that information” (p. 86). The cultural knowledge and activity guiding a wampum belt’s design is materialized through the hyperlinking or networking of specific nodes (e.g., colored beads or shells) by hand. Wampum belts communicate embodied or materialized knowledge by presenting a visual map which can be read by orators able to perceive the cultural connections between nodes.

Although culturally and historically distinct from wampum, cemeteries similarly embody localized cultural knowledge or practices over time through the organization of human and non-human bodies. This knowledge is then circulated across cultural networks for visitors to “read,” mediating our activity in a manner that reifies the space’s material, cultural, and textual meaning. When members of the Jewish faith are materially prompted by the technical documentation around them to leave stones atop graves as a sign of material remembrance, our cultural activity is embodied in both the headstones we visit and the stones we leave behind. A mourner’s mediated activity materializes the symbolic significance of cultural practices and beliefs within a network of actors. Participating in fluid networks of cultural and material intra-actions enable gravestones (i.e., nodes) and cemeteries (i.e., networks of activity) to serve as sites of technical documentation and communication. We might therefore see technical communication as a field of inquiry made from culturally vibrant human and non-human actors, actors who are produced within culturally informed assemblages of technical documentation through various iterations of physical and/or symbolic mediation. In short, technical documentation is itself an active participant in circulating and sustaining the technical communication of cultural information.

THE B’NAI ISRAEL CEMETERY: A CASE STUDY

Headstones, tombstones, and other grave markers are technical documents produced through the material assemblage of cultural artifacts. Kathleen Blake Yancey (2018) explains that within cemeteries an “assembage…assumes a borrowing, a circulation of textual materials, with each tombstone tablet providing a temporarily stable site for the circulation of visual and verbal material that collectively remember, honor, and comment on the deceased” (p. 61). In other words, headstones are multimodal technical documents designed to circulate information about or representations of the deceased by tapping into a cultural reservoir of “language, images, layout, and so on” (p. 64). Cultural commonplaces in Jewish headstone design connect individual nodes within the B’nai Israel Cemetery by drawing from the localized social energy animating Gainesville’s evolving Jewish community and their documented history or memory. As Wright (2005) explains in reference to a peripheralized Black cemetery in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, cemeteries as rhetorical storehouses for a public’s memory are “always reflecting, contesting and inverting the [wider] society from which they come” (p. 71–72). To both better understand the cultural energy embedded in the B’nai Israel Cemetery and give justice or tzedek to Abraham’s memory, we need to explore its users’ social and political context.

Technical communication and user experience scholarship centered on communication design are often invested in user-localization or “the specific activities and strategies users employ when communicating to meet their culturally situated needs” (Gonzales & Zantjer, 2015, p. 272). Abraham Pinkussoum and his contemporaries’ culturally situated needs were tied to their complicated identity as refugees. The nineteenth century saw a mass exodus of Jews leaving Europe for the United States due to racial and religious persecution (e.g., anti-Jewish riots and segregation) (Zerivitz, 2020, p. 33), stemming principally from their racial status as “Semites” (Goldstein, 2006, p. 16). In his book The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity (2006), Eric Goldstein observes that the racial status of Jews in America during the nineteenth century often fluctuated between being a point of pride or derision:

While unflattering racial caricatures of Jews were familiar in nineteenth-century America, positive racial images were at least as common. Non-Jews frequently spoke in complimentary terms of the Jews ‘as a race,’ emphasizing their thrift, commercial success, and community mindedness. (p. 17)

Depending on the status of the economy or a particular population’s attitude toward Jews, a Jewish American’s “community mindedness” could also be read as “clannishness,” a common justification for segregating Jews from certain social spaces (see Goldstein, 2006). European Jewish immigrants—like the Pinkussoums—could therefore be accepted by some White communities and denied by others according to how close or distant local Jews were to concepts of Blackness or Whiteness, respectively.

Whereas racial tensions in America can never be simplified into a Black-White dichotomy, “white Americans often tried to understand Jews and other European ‘racial’ groups within a black-white framework as a means of suppressing the troubling uncertainty they represented” (Goldstein, 2006, p. 41). Although Jews, in certain regions and at certain times, were thought to have been inferior to their Black counterparts (p. 42), this does not seem to have been the case in Florida. Florida census takers classified Abraham Pinkussoum and his family as White (United States Census, 1870), suggesting that some members of Gainesville’s early Jewish population were afforded certain (White) privileges. Skin-color in this instance may have had an impact on how the Pinkussoums were treated in Gainesville during the nineteenth century. Jewish settler-colonists’ culturally situated needs in Gainesville, Florida were likely centered on their identities as White-passing racial and religious refugees.

While exile has, for many Jewish communities, profoundly shaped their identities (Bernard-Donals and Fernheimer, 2014, p. vii), it is important to note that Jewish Americans arriving on native
Seminole and Timucua land (i.e., Gainesville) benefited from Black suffering as well as the eradication and/or displacement of native populations. Some Jewish settler-colonists indirectly benefited from the forced labor used to colonize Indigenous land, while others—like Moses Elias Levy—used Black enslaved labor to create “a refuge for European Jews fleeing the pogroms and restrictions of the post-Napoleonic era” (Zerivitz, 2020, p. 13). Despite their status as a scapegoated minority, early Jewish settlers living in Gainesville used their White privilege to tap into White power structures to benefit themselves and their community.

Ignoring the critical intersections between Jewish, Black, and Indigenous history in Gainesville would only serve to erase the presence of the latter two groups, an act that would deviate from the idea of giving justice or tzedek to an individual or community’s memory. Instead, it is much more productive to consider how their identity as both beneficiaries and victims of White power impacted their being in the world. How did Abraham and his contemporaries as a persecuted religious and ethnic minority leverage their Whiteness to create a space for their community? What might we learn about Whiteness from its fluctuating acceptance for and rejection of the Jewish other?

Despite their physical and temporal nearness to and experiences of persecution both abroad and in other parts of the American South (see Jo Zerivitz, 2020), Gainesville’s early Jewish population needed to engage White institutions tied to the colonization of land in order to create spaces for the community’s preservation and proliferation. After all, Judaism “requires that a Jew must be buried in a Jewish cemetery…. Burial in a non-sectarian cemetery is allowed only if the Jewish graves are not intermingled with the graves of other religions” (Heimovics & Zerivitz, 2000, p. 3). Moreover, burial must occur as quickly as possible after death. Because there were no Jewish cemeteries in Florida until 1857, many families shipped Jewish bodies “out of state for ritual burial” (p. 3), delaying the time between death and interment. Gainesville’s early Jewish inhabitants needed a space to bury and connect with their loved ones.

The existence of a Jewish cemetery in Gainesville is culturally significant as it denotes the creation of a Semitic space, where the dead may be properly remembered—a place designated principally for the community to practice its cultural customs. By creating a cemetery space for the community, families like the Pinkussouns could better contest their total assimilation into White Christian culture, evinced by some early headstones “speaking” largely in Hebrew before including small portions of English text. Early headstones invert hegemonic power dynamics by creating a place for the linguistic and religious other while, simultaneously and contradictingly, occupying Indigenous land. The complicated social history of these documents engages conversations surrounding the “integration of social justice into technical communication” (Jones, 2016, p. 3), hinting again at how cultural rhetorics widens technical communication’s disciplinary scope. With an understanding of the cemetery and its history, we might read the B’nai Israel Cemetery’s technical documentation with an eye toward user localization to peer into the processes by which headstones and other technical objects met and continue to meet their local community’s evolving needs. We may give justice (tzedek) to Abraham’s seemingly lost memory by identifying his voice in the cultural practices and knowledge circulating throughout the B’nai Israel Cemetery.

Abraham Pinkussoun’s Gravestone

By virtue of being the first grave in what would become Gainesville’s B’nai Israel Cemetery, Abraham Pinkussoun’s tombstone (Figure 4) lays the literal foundation for the cemetery’s cultural circulation of technical information. Abraham’s headstone visually communicates that its primary audience can read Hebrew, evincing by the spatial difference in surface area between the document’s Hebrew and English text. The designer’s decision to write in Hebrew without using punctuation as is done in the Torah (or the Old Testament) and other texts for adults would further suggest that the text’s intended audience has a cultural familiarity with the language, one often achieved in Diaspora through an involvement in religious life. Moreover, both portions of the text pictured in Figure 4 are wrapped in a carving depicting what looks to be a plant in bloom, an image that for Jewish viewers mediates their symbolic activity by calling to mind the declaration in the Torah that “‘all flesh is grass, and all its goodness like flowers of the field: Grass withers, flowers fade… Indeed, man is but grass’” (Sefaria, Isaiah 40:6–7). If flowers and grass are transient like the human body, then the decision to picture in stone a blooming plant and/or lively greenery signals the longevity of Abraham’s memory to readers with the relevant cultural rather than purely linguistic knowledge.

As a tenet of Judaism, memory connects members of different Jewish communities to a shared past, creating a sense of peoplehood (see Bernard-Donals and Fernheimer, 2004). For example, the Torah commands that “in every generation a person must view himself [or herself] as though he [or she] personally left Egypt” from bondage (Sefaria, Pesachim 116b). The bonds forged between different Jewish communities, however, honor differences by invoking “the relationship of the individual to the community or that of an insider group to an outside group” (Bernard-Donals & Fernheimer, 2014, p. xiv). By writing Abraham’s memory in both Hebrew and English, the gravestone pictured above attends to his community’s shared cultural history and language while also observing its relationship to the outside English-speaking world. Although a sizeable amount of Jewish Americans today no longer read Hebrew fluently (including myself), we continue to leave Hebrew inscriptions on our headstones to connect each generation to one another through a legacy of tradition. The rhetorical assertion of the community’s uniqueness through its linguistic and cultural differences prevents the group’s cultural identity from being erased.

Figure 4: Abraham Pinkussoun’s tombstone in the B’nai Israel Cemetery. The image on the right has been digitally edited for legibility.
Although technical representations of Abraham’s memory are detailed largely in Hebrew, the text’s shallow blocky lettering render it practically illegible, demonstrating perhaps the need for a tactile form of embodied literacy. As a digital text or a text produced by “fingers, our digits” (Haas, 2007, p. 84), a visitor might read the shape of the tactile sensations each indentation produces on his/her/their fingers. But with the help of a closely-linked network of interested rabbis and other Hebrew speakers in or from Brooklyn, New York, who wish to remain anonymous, the following transcription and translation were put together with some difficulty:

In Loving Memory of the Victims

Our first child, the light of our eyes, we lost you when you were young. He was honored by the people of every respectable name, and was known by everyone who saw him as a charitable man. He has risen to the heavens, amongst the high-ranking armies of the Blessed One, Abraham Ben Pinkus, Rabbeinu Aryeh, who lived for twenty years and gave everybody life, 10 Elul 5631. Gainesville, Florida. (“Abraham Pinkussoun’s Gravestone,” 1871)

The text is strikingly intimate, with Abraham’s mother and father addressing their son before turning their attention to their audience by writing about their son in the second person. The gravestone goes on to say in English, “To the memory of our beloved son Abraham Pinkussoun / Born in New York Jan. 28, 1851 / Died in Gainesville FLA. Aug. 27, 1871 / Aged 20 yrs. and 8 months / May his soul rest in peace. Amen” (“Abraham Pinkussoun’s Gravestone”). With Gainesville’s Jewish population in 1871 totaling about two-dozen people according to the Congregation B’nai Israel (“History of B’nai Israel Cemetery,” 2015), the Hebrew text rhetorically crafts a message written for members of Abraham’s community.

The text mediates the visual activity of outsiders by displaying nothing more than a wall of illegible etchings, hiding for example that “Abraham Ben Pinkus” or “Abraham son of Pinkus,” who died on 10 Elul 5631 (i.e., August 27th, 1871), was not only a “Rabbeinu Aryeh” or “teacher of strength” but was also “known by everyone who saw him as a charitable man” (“Abraham Pinkussoun’s Gravestone,” 1871). Culturally meaningful representations or memories of Abraham are compartmentalized, with the only information given to outsider groups being mostly Westernized factual knowledge (e.g., Gregorian birth and death dates). Like the sign pictured in Figure 1, Abraham’s tombstone mediates viewer activity by hiding and/or revealing cultural knowledge, intra-acting with users to invoke their identity as members or outsiders to the community while also marking the cemetery as a primarily Jewish space.

The document’s bilingualism “contribute[s] to cultural knowledge production and preservation” (Haas, 2007, p. 91), circulating and hiding cultural meaning. Abraham’s headstone mediates user activity by asking its target audience to switch between Hebrew and English, modeling or embodying the lived experiences of Gainesville’s early Jewish population, many of whom navigated violent social structures within English speaking communities. By understanding the stark contrast between what is and is not circulated to outside groups, Jewish users better understand their and their community’s contemporary and/or historical relationship to the larger Gainesville and Alachua County area. Because technical representations of Abraham’s memory functionally invoke insider and outsider groups, circulating and obscuring the production of knowledge in a manner that signals the space’s cultural identity, Abraham’s “voice” materially and culturally reverberates wherever memory serves to create a sense of peoplehood through difference.

A Cultural Network of Material Voices

We find subtle circulations of Abraham’s memory within the cemetery through objects like Gainesville’s Holocaust Memorial (Figure 5), a large pillar physically disrupting a walkway’s otherwise linear path. According to Carol Blair (1999), “rhetoric’s materiality constructs communal space, prescribes pathways, and summons attention, acting on the whole person of the audience. But it also allows a rhetorical text to ‘speak’ by its mere existence” (p. 48). Defining material rhetoric as any partisan or meaningful text, with the term “text” referring to interpretable objects or events (p. 18), Blair describes how material objects like monuments and memorials can communicate cultural knowledge by physically mediating user activity. The Gainesville Holocaust Memorial in

Figure 5: The Gainesville Holocaust Memorial in the B’nai Israel Cemetery. Not pictured are two memorial benches with the following inscriptions: “In Loving Memory of the Victims” and “We Remember.” Inscribed on the memorial is the following: “IN MEMORY OF THE SIX MILLION / I shall give them in my house / And within my walls / A memorial and a name… / Isaiah 56:5.”
particular mediates visitors’ bodily movements in physical space, imposing itself onto viewers in an intra-active process capable of producing activity, namely actions that inspire or call attention to forms of remembrance.

Displayed at a slant for the viewer’s benefit, a two-thirds completed Star of David decorates the top of the granite memorial. The cultural iconography is meant to call to a visitor’s mind a memory of the six million Jews (one-third of the world’s Jewish population) murdered in the Holocaust (JOLA, 2015). Hence, the Star of David mediates the viewer’s visual and symbolic activity, turning the stone into a memorial and the viewer into a mourner. At the same time, a user’s bodily activity is being mediated as well, with the memorial redirecting the area’s communal space in a manner that forces visitors to pass (and possibly sit on) one of the two memorial benches, each of which display words like “remember” and “in loving memory” (“Gainesville’s Holocaust Memorial,” 2010). The pillar’s intra-action with its visitors and the space around it materialize the memory of those lost in the Holocaust, prompting cultural activities that contribute to the space’s Jewish identity.

Tapping into cultural iconography while dedicating itself to the “memory of the six million” (“Gainesville’s Holocaust Memorial”, 2010), the memorial circulates Abraham’s memory by contributing to the cemetery’s enculturation, producing Jewish technical documents and users. Abraham’s memory can be found in the Gainesville Holocaust Memorial as well as the surrounding tombstones which circulate cultural iconography while mediating cultural practices (Figures 2 and 3), or even signage aimed at rhetorically choosing which users may or may not enter the cemetery’s memorial grounds (Figure 1). According to Elizabethada A. Wright (2005), “If one sees cemeteries as a rhetorical space, then there are thousands upon thousands of voices clamoring to be heard, a cacophony of remembrances calling out” (p. 60). As a rhetorical place of technical communication, the Gainesville Jewish Cemetery and its later iteration as the B’nai Israel Cemetery are in conversation with one another, culturally linked through the growing number of Jewish voices asking to be heard within the same plot of land. Although this article focuses on Abraham’s voice, each technical artifact within the cemetery adds a new voice into the space, building on and reinforcing Abraham’s memory.

What guides or organizes the echoing voices within the cemetery at the end of the cow path are the cultural connections they have to other nodes or technical documents, contributing to the cemetery’s status as a cultural network of technical communication. Each node circulates and recirculates Abraham’s memory through his technical representation, intra-acting with users and visitors to create a cultural space, where the past meets the present and a unique cultural memory is embodied through mediated activity. Creating a uniquely Jewish space through a shared sense of peoplehood, technical communication within the B’nai Israel Cemetery demonstrates what Kendall Leon (2013) describes in her work on Chincana rhetoric in community institutions as “the movement of collective change…working slowly through the nuanced internal work of an organization that was often not visible” (p. 172). Assembled slowly over time as the city’s peripheralized and at times privileged Jewish population steadily increased, the technical documentation collected within the Gainesville Jewish Cemetery represent artifacts of hidden user activity that change the area’s political landscape by making space for an ethnic, religious, and linguistic other (Figure 6).

CONCLUSION
Exploring cemeteries as important spaces of technical documentation illustrates how technical documents are intimately tied to their localized cultural context(s). Technical representations of the deceased are tied to cultural practices when they are materialized as symbolic objects like headstones or monuments, objects which tap into cultural reservoirs of knowledge through the circulation of cultural iconography or linguistic practices. The circulation and materialization of cultural knowledge enables technical documents to mediate physical (e.g., visual) and symbolic (e.g., translational) activity. Far from being an inert vehicle for communication, technical artifacts play an active role in technical communication, participating in an ongoing and co-constitutive process of intra-activity. By mediating our activity through cultural sign technology—like iconography and epitaphs—hearstones...
prompt users to embody cultural knowledge through organized displays of respect, turning the document into a headstone and the user into a mourner. In short, technical communication should be seen as an embodied act of cultural circulation.

For the Pinkussoun family, the potential for technical documentation to embody Jewish cultural values enables Abraham’s otherwise lost memory to exist well into the present. Moreover, the physical existence of a space reserved for the circulation of Jewish customs and histories through technical communication empowers the local Jewish community by creating an area that, as the passcode to the cemetery gates suggests (Figure 1), gives *chai* or life. Our potential as technical communicators to empower different cultural communities stems from seeing technical documentation and technical users as co-constitutive. It becomes easier to understand how our technical artifacts “engage issues of power and legitimacy” (Jones, 2016, p. 2), when we step outside Western notions of being, as well as when we consider the complicated contexts in which these documents came to life.

Understanding that technical communication occurs not only in pamphlets but also in physical spaces like cemeteries creates greater exigence for the field’s attentiveness to both valuing and legitimizing “the experience and perspectives of others” (Jones, 2016, p. 6). Technical communication influences and is influenced by cultural rhetorics, with both disciplines widening one another’s disciplinary boundary. By rhetorically mediating user activity to shape a group’s cultural identity and collective memory, technical communication has the potential to empower members of diverse communities and enhance their voices across time and space.

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