

Lisa Maruca
Department of Interdisciplinary Studies
Wayne State University
Detroit, MI 48202

**Cultures of Copying, Cultures of Copyright:
Academic Anxiety and the Plagiarism Panic**

This paper discusses an often overlooked ramification of the increasingly restrictive culture of copyright in the U.S.: the new vigilance towards, and more and more strident condemnations of another form of unauthorized copying, plagiarism. Plagiarism is a vexed and vexing issue, if we are to judge solely by the amount of rhetoric generated by this issue in the popular media, among educators, and in scholarly articles across a variety of fields. Plagiarism is considered a widespread and growing problem, made easier by information technologies such as the Internet, which allow for easy research and source retrieval—and an easy way to cut and paste without attribution. The problem is believed to add to faculty workload, disrupt the learning process and undermine the nature and value of education itself. Solutions range from the pedagogical—advocating “process” methods of writing, teaching academic integrity—to the technological—subscribing to detection software services that use custom algorithms to compare student papers to the Web and other text databases.

Despite the time, energy and resources dedicated to prevention, surveillance and adjudication, however, little work has been done that attempts to dissect the *meanings* conveyed by “plagiarism.” Instead, much of the instructional literature on plagiarism assumes that notions of academic honesty and the citation conventions meant to reflect that ethical grounding are based on universal traditions. It implies that while procedures for recognizing attribution may differ stylistically across disciplines, they derive from a shared, transdisciplinary, even natural, understanding of authorship, ownership and the construction of knowledge in the academy. Because the problem is seen as a “common sense” issue, reactions to it are likewise thought to be rooted in a collective sense of moral outrage.

While not denying the ethical dimension of the plagiarism problem, this paper argues that the hyper-vigilance towards faulty source use and unsanctioned copying must be analyzed in the context of a culture increasingly oriented towards “fixing” a dangerously mutable and free-flowing textuality through legal rubrics of ownership and protection. Indeed, the “plagiarism panic” can be understood as a manifestation of a prevailing anxiety about new media, global information transformation, and the morphing of discursive forms and practices that accompany these changes. The contradictory positioning of those most ready to prosecute plagiarism can best be illustrated by an analysis of the legal disputes arising from universities’ adopting the most popular plagiarism detection service, Turnitin.com.