


FOREWORD

Vincent Barletta

Stanford University

On October 10, 2014, Facebook founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg announced that his company had just purchased the popular text-messaging platform WhatsApp for \$16 billion. In his statement to the press that day, Zuckerberg mentioned that the WhatsApp team had «done some amazing work to connect almost half a billion people» and that he couldn't wait for them become a part of Facebook and help «connect the rest of the world.» This vague but unquestionably upbeat public statement met with a great deal of applause; however, what exactly is meant here by the term *connect*?

In a 2010 article in the *New York Review of Books* , Zadie Smith makes the point that Zuckerberg has tended to use the words connect and connection in much the same way that «believers use the word Jesus, as if it were sacred in and of itself.» If this is so, then Zuckerberg is not alone among those who have shaped our experience of the Internet. In a 2007 commencement address at Harvard University, Bill Gates speaks breathlessly of the Internet as a «magical thing,» that has the power to «collapse distance and make everyone your neighbor.»

How have the new, digitally engineered forms of connection and closeness afforded by the Internet (and the social media built upon it) impacted more quotidian and traditional modes of proximity? Do they indeed connect us in meaningful

ways? Or are we merely hurrying toward what sociologist Richard Sennett has described as the «tyranny of intimacy»? Is perhaps the very hallmark of Silicon Valley neoliberalism the monetization of closeness? At an even more basic level, what exactly is it that we mean when we use words such as *closeness* and *connection*? Do they always signify something desirable and good? Is there also danger in closeness, a dark side to connection? What, we might ask, are the limits or boundaries that shield us from such dangers? How close is too close?

Closeness and *connection* are central terms in a range of academic fields and disciplines, from architecture and urban planning to family therapy and physics. What has remained elusive, however, is a uniquely and explicitly humanistic account of their meaning, reach, and impact. What can the humanities teach us about these concepts? It is one thing, after to all, to speak of «closeness to family» in anthropological, sociological, or biological terms (class, kinship structures, evolution, etc.), and quite another to engage it as a paradox acutely felt—a jacket of thorns that both protects and pricks—and expressed through art, literature, and philosophy. The goal of the present issue of *Forma de Vida*, whether we are speaking of beauty, art, poems, Internet, or translation, is to provide more deeply contextualized (and provocative) substance

to what it is we mean when we say, «closeness.» Emerging from this project, we hope, is a renewed interest in theorizing closeness and our human need to negotiate relations of proximity.

Like a stowaway on a ship, closeness has all too often traveled along with us without our having taken explicit notice of it, without our having studied its effect upon us, or even naming it as such. As human agents, we strive for it, we eschew it, we simulate it, and we work to prevent it from occurring (through walls and filters of various sorts); however, we seldom pause to examine and define what it is that we mean by it in different social, cultural, and historical settings. Am I truly close to the tiger at the zoo although bars separate us? Am I closer to my home when

I'm away? How close am I to the stranger in the seat next to me on an airplane, our elbows gently pushing against one another on the armrest? What draws me to physical books? What pulls me to my children even as they push me away? Are closeness and connection even possible on the Internet?

The present issue proceeds inductively, and it seeks to initiate a broader conversation on closeness within the humanities and a general audience of non-specialists, one that enters into dialogue with existing work in the social and physical sciences but that develops an approach, method, and vocabulary that is recognizably humanistic.