Talking Back to the Text

Marginalia, Marginalization, and Marginalized People

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What is a "margin?"

- An edge, a border; that part of a surface which lies immediately within its boundary, esp. when in some way marked off or distinguished from the rest of the surface.
- A region or point of transition between states, epochs, etc.; a moment in time when some change or occurrence is imminent. Now frequently: a limit below or beyond which something ceases to be feasible.
- The space on a page, etc., between its extreme edge and the main body of written or printed matter; *esp.* the border at either side of a page, as distinguished from the head and foot; a vertical line marking this off.
- An annotation placed in the margin of a work

In other words…

- The edge between something central and its border
- A space or time when change is occurring, something is becoming something else
- In a book, that part between the main text and the edge of the page
- Something written in margins of the book
- Periphery, far from the center but still inside the boundary
- Not the text, but something the text is written on

Marginalia as a Political Act

- Fear of writing in books… It's just wrong
- Beginning to use sticky notes
- Folding down page corners, dog-ears
- Highlighting important passages
- Writing back to the text

Why Write in your books?

- To Remember what you've read
- To summarize what the author said (to understand)
- To highlight or comment on something important (make judgments)
- To disagree with or critique the author about something (to talk back to the text)

Note increasing levels of agency and empowerment

Writing Fearlessly in Books
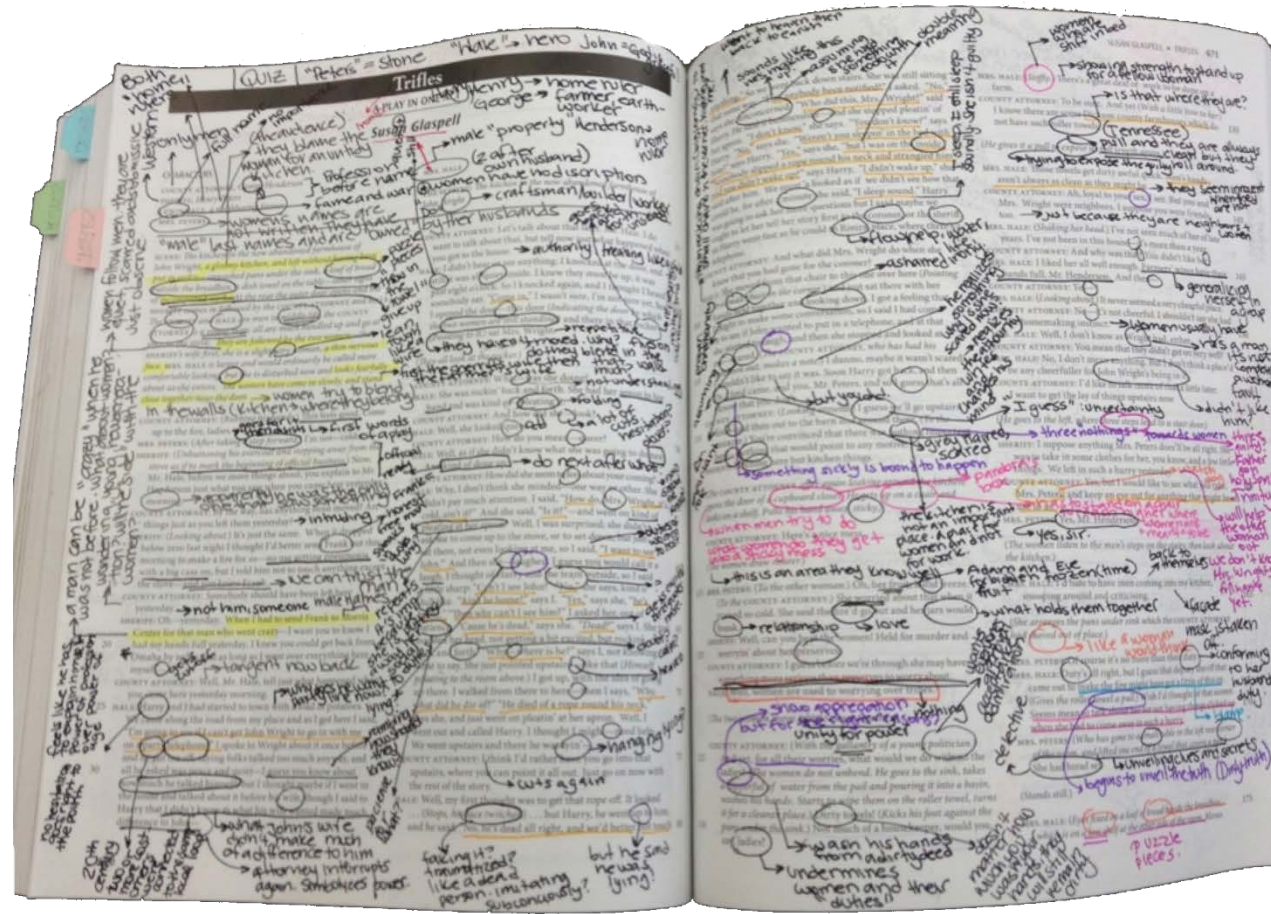
Writing in Margins and Power

- Writing in Books Involves Agency
- Writing in Books Means Claiming a Voice
- Writing in Books Creates a Dialogue
- Confident Readers Write More Critically
- Empowered Readers Write More Confidently

Talking Back to the Text as Academic Writing

"Academic writing ... calls upon writers not to simply express their own ideas, but to do so as a response to what others have said."

"Intellectual writing is almost always composed in response to others' 'texts.'"

"Despite this growing consensus that writing is a social, conversational act, helping student writers actually participate in these conversations remains a formidable challenge."

Graff and Birkenstein. *They Say, I Say: The Moves that Matter in Academia.*

When is a Text not a Text?

- A Text is any human creation intentionally crafted to convey a message.
- A text is understood in a community addressed by the text.
- A text uses conventions of communication understood by the community.
- A text might be alphabetic, but is not necessarily.
- A text requires cultural context beyond decoding symbols.

Texts Create Insiders and Outsiders

- Insiders can read texts as part of community
- Insiders decode symbols and understand cultural implications
- Good readers of texts have increased status
- Those who can't read well have lower status
- Ability to read texts is "literacy"
- Some literacies are "power literacies," powerful enough to dominate through literacy

How did it feel to not be able to participate in 'reading' this picture?

Texts, Cultures, and Margins

- Those who share reality share culture (Look at us here now)
- This means there are "us" (insiders) and there are "them" (outsiders)
- From within the cultural bubble there are winners (insiders) and losers (outsiders)
- Texts also are important in creating "us" and "them."
- Othering and social reality, "_They_ need to be governed" (Said)
- Can the subaltern speak? (Spivak)
- Marginalize is a verb: "To push to the margins"

Centers, Margins, and Contact Zones

"Social spaces where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in _contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power_, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they lived out in many parts of the world today."

Mary Louise Pratt, "Arts of the Contact Zone"

Strategies of Students on the Margins

- "Authoethnography, transculturation, critique, collaboration, bilingualism, mediation, parody, denunciation, imaginary dialogue, vernacular expression – these are some of the literate arts of the contact zone.

- Miscomprehension, incomprehension, dead letters, unread masterpieces, absolute heterogeneity of meaning – these are some of the perils of writing in the contact zone."

Mary Louise Pratt. "Arts of the Contact Zone."

Playfulness and the Contact Zone

"You on the Kay Kay side?"

"In the face of a seemingly incontestable teacher script, students assert forms of <u>local knowledge</u> that are neither recognized nor included within the teacher script…. Such forms of knowledge include <u>unacknowledged cultural references</u> to popular music, film and television. In this way, individual students take stances towards the roles they are expected to play."

Gutierrez, Rymes, and Larson. "Script, Counterscript, and Underlife in the Classroom: James Brown vs. Brown v Board of Education

Institutions and the Social Fabric

- Institutions are interconnected, contributing to a macro-narrative (e.g. the American Idea), building a case for cultural legitimacy

- People share cultural experience of major institutions: Churches, Schools, Legal System, Police, Banking System, Military, <u>Libraries</u>, etc. Each reframes and plays a part in the macro-narrative.

- The shared narrative provides social harmony, as long as people accept the narrative. Social order depends on harmonious consent to be governed

- "Hegemony" is the force applied when people no longer consent to being governed. Coercion replaces consent.

Imagined Communities

"I have been powerfully reminded that we have all been raised with fidelity to a very large idea, the <u>American</u> <u>idea</u>. When that idea comes under threat, and it seems as if *<u>the center might not hold</u>*, it is not just our politics that suffers.... It is deeply upsetting to people everywhere, almost existentially so, and we all suffer."

Jeff Flake, *The New York Times,* Monday, Nov. 6

So What Does All This Have To Do With Libraries?

A Way to Think about Libraries

- The Library is physical and mythical "center" with margins.
- The Library is <u>produced</u> as a "text" and must be "read" by those who know the extensive codes and culture.
- The Library serves and defines its imagined community and how that community relates to larger cultural narrative.
- The Library is a Contact Zone, where cultures meet, clash, and grapple
- The current library narrative is disrupted. Much is at stake in how (or whether) we reconstruct it.

We Live and Work in a Transformed Institution

- Historic Universities articulated the culture in the Nation State
- Historic Universities built character and citizenship
- Historic Universities were patient and idiosyncratic

- New Universities articulate the idea of excellence
- New Universities are builders of economic humans
- New Universities are streamlined and efficient

Let's not be zombies….

The Library as a Privileged Center

- Library as Text: A Center with Margins
- Who, What, Where are its boundaries and margins?
- Collecting on the Margins
- Digital Humanities as Critical Intervention
- Information Literacy as Boundary Work
- Managing for the Marginal

Library as Space and Text

- Nostalgia for Centrality, The old heart of the campus, Temple of Learning (cathedral architecture)
- Library as Third Place, Like a coffee shop or bookstore. What's wrong with that?
- Library as a shop or information mall, (a collection of shops) Something familiar and comfortable.
- Talking to the library text from the margins: Who owns this text? Who is it for? Who is it not for? How do we read its codes? How do we talk back to it? Graffiti?
- Marginal people and the information mall

The Library Collection as a Text

- Collection is "everything worth studying"
- Authoritative, refereed, peer-reviewed, (Power Literacy in action)
- Are we currently redefining what is worth studying? On what basis?
- We are rethinking the infrastructure of collections. What's driving decisions? What are the priorities?
- Collecting for whom? Infrastructure for whom?
- Why would you collect ephemera and marginalia (i.e. writing in the margins)?
- What new challenges does collecting on the margins create? Appropriating cultural texts for study? Negotiating terms of use?

Digital Humanities as Critical Intervention

- Digital Humanities and conventional academic categories (status, disciplinarity, public scholarship)
- Digital Humanities and physical and intellectual infrastructure (labs to metadata)
- Why is Digital Humanities so white? Technical standards and social theory….
- Digital Humanities as "excellently radical"
- "I love to be at the center of collaborative activity!"
- The same canon, only digital!!

Information Literacy as Boundary Work

- If all the library is a text, then all library work is information literacy work.

- Student learning and the margin/center spectrum

- Information literacy: Not Just Skills but foundation of a way of knowing and belonging in the academy

- Intensely dialogic and affective (i.e. hard work and inefficient)

- Notoriously difficult to assess and so tasked with assessment

- Do we want higher education to address historical inequities or not? What role should libraries play?

Managing and Leading (for) the Margins

- "The Value of Academic Libraries"
- Vertical Torque in the academy
- Vision as defining the center and its margins (who we are and who we're not)
- Meaningful Assessment (not just counting)
- How does the library respond to the cultural moment?
- Does the library talk back to the university text?

Your Center is my Margin: Ways We're Divided

- White and Non-White
- English Speaking and Non-English Speaking
- Immigrant and Native
- Christian and Non-Christian
- Male and Female
- Rich and Poor
- Techie and Non-Techie
- Urban and Rural
- Straight and LGBTQ
- Over-educated and Under-educated

We're all centers, and we're all margins

We're all Marginal Now

"Much of what students are protesting … is the expression of viewpoints or ideologies that offend them and make them feel marginalized. They are fed up with what they see as a blanket protection of free speech that, at its extreme, permits the expression of views by neo-Nazis and white supremacists."

- Michael H. Schill, President, University of Oregon, in "The Misguided Student Crusade Against 'Fascism." *New York Times*, Oct. 23, 2017

Who speaks for the Margins?

- Who Gets to Claim Marginal Status? Why would someone _choose_ to?
- Are there hierarchies of marginalization?
- How do the non-marginalized express support to/for the marginalized?
- Can the marginalized speak in the academy without abandoning identity?
- What does it mean to be an educator in a decentered, post-cultural university?

The Scene of Teaching in the Transformed University

- A "rephrasing of teaching and learning as sites of *obligation."* Scene of "*ethical practices,* rather than … transmission of scientific knowledge"
- "Answerable to *the question of justice,* rather than to the criteria of truth."
- Stop trying to (re)produce the ideal citizen-subject for a lost nation-state
- Focus on the dialogic of thinking together, our mutual obligation to thought itself.

Bill Readings. *The University in Ruins.*

An Apology for Theory

Theory in the library has a bad reputation: Cranky, Negative, Accusatory, Smartypants. The point is to transform practice, not to win an argument. Listening is more important than talking. To be critical, you first have to understand.

"I read Marx before I knew it was just theory." Richard Fyffe

Toward a Critical Dialectic

- Criticism interrogates social institutions (like libraries) to ask <u>guided</u> questions about social reality and the state of the narrative
- Criticism asks about "them," encourages "them" to speak and tries to speak on "their" behalf
- Criticism sees world as constructed (not inevitable), which means it can be transformed (improved) from within
- Criticism works toward dialectic (or dialogue) with reality and realists

Final Words

- I am not a political scientist or an economist. I am an educator.
- I don't propose solutions to political problems. I try to define what it means to educate people as they live through life's challenges.
- The academic library is a context for learning. We are all educators.
- Educators ask questions and encourage learners to find their voices and use them.
- The challenge of today is dialogic, not didactic.