

Notes on Notes

Literacy in the Margins

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In getting my books, I have been always solicitous of an ample margin; this not so much through any love of the thing in itself, however agreeable, as for the facility it affords me of penciling suggested thoughts, agreements, and differences (p. 101),

writes Edgar Allen Poe in 1844. He writes further,

During a rainy afternoon, not long ago, being in a mood too listless for continuous study, I sought relief from ennui in dipping here and there, at random, among the volumes of my library—no very large one, certainly, but sufficiently miscellaneous; and, I flatter myself, not a little recherché. Perhaps it was what the Germans call the ‘brain-scattering’ humor of the moment; but, while the picturesque ness of the numerous pencil-scratches arrested my attention, their helter-skelter-iness of commentary amused me. (p.101)

BOTH THE *PICTURESQUE NESS* and humorous *helter-skelter-iness* of margin notes capture Kyla Mallett’s photographic attention in her series entitled *Marginalia*. They arrest and amuse. And do more. They offer traces of reading practices, signs of cracks in cultural orthodoxies, hints of the shadowy processes of becoming ‘student,’ and make visible what Elizabeth Ellsworth (2005) has called “knowledge in the making.”

A Vancouver based photographer, Kyla Mallett’s artistic practice consistently examines the intersection of language and culture. Often bringing together the concerns of teens, feminism, and art history, Mallett borrows from the formal aesthetics of 1960s conceptual art and applies quasi-sociological methods of sampling and archiving to reveal alternative networks of communication within various, often hidden-from-view social milieus. James Scott’s (1990) notion of “hidden transcripts,” defined as discourse that takes place ‘offstage,’ beyond direct observation by power holders, aptly describes the communicative exchanges that Mallett investigates in her work. Commenting on his own work on the marking of texts in literacy education, Dennis Sumera (2001) notes that what is generally missing from many accounts of literary engagement

is an explicit theorizing of these as sites of learning (p. 68). Mallett's photographs offer this opportunity.

In the series *Marginalia*, Mallett portrays the contested relationship between a community of book borrowers, the library as institution, and their relationships to published texts. For her project, Mallett received permission from the Vancouver Public Library staff to access and document books identified as damaged by marginalia, prior to their correction and re-entrance into circulation. The marked pages reflect readers' responses to teen suicide (Dr. David Bergman's *Kids on the Brink*, 1990), the Montreal Massacre (*The Montreal Massacre*, 1991 edited by Louise Malette and Marie Chalouh), memoirs of British Columbia artist Emily Carr (*Klee Wyck*, 1971) and the work of proto-Conceptual artist Marcel Duchamp (*The Bride & the Bachelors*, 1976).

Book pages were photographed with marginalia in situ and in the process parallels are drawn between the practice of reading and the reception of art. Just as literacy and reader-response theorists (Bleich, 1987; Meek, 1991; Rosenblatt, 1978) have detailed the complex ways literary engagement and response are imbricated within the layered contexts of reading, art reception theorists argue that the meaning of works of art are constructed in our consumption of them (Barrett, 1999). The production of the work is not separate from its consumption. The placement of photographs of book pages in the gallery, setting therefore, blurs the boundaries of exactly what kind of activity the viewer/reader is engaged in—viewing art? Reading the printed page? The reader is an art viewer in the gallery, at the same time as the art viewer is also a reader.

Figure 1



Marginalia, Installation view
 Artspeak
 Courtesy of the artist

The photographs echo questions posed by H.J. Jackson (2001) in her book entitled, *Marginalia: Readers Writing in Books*. What advantage does the reader find in marking up a book? What difference does the presence of notes make for the reader who follows? What do these notes tell us? As Jackson outlines, annotation of texts is a centuries old tradition reaching back beyond the birth of print—it is taken for granted as part of the common reading experience. As a literacy event, marginalia are integral to readers’ textual interactions and their interpretive processes (Heath, 1982: 93). They represent a complex set of cultural activities that participate in the ongoing conditioning of developing personal and cultural knowledge and understanding. The introduction of electronic reading devices seems to not have hampered the habit. On the contrary, any curiosity about the reading habits of anonymous others can now be satisfied through Amazon.com’s display of lists of the passages and books most heavily highlighted on the Kindle (Denn, 2010).

Authors, Readers and Texts

From an author’s perspective, marginalia may be something other than innocent. For example, Jackson (2001) notes that Virginia Woolf described marginalia as a three-way relationship between the author, the unknown annotator, and the reader. Woolf’s writings suggest marginalia usurps authorial authority as “The Unknown” is described as an invader into the text who does not allow a response from the author and always gets the last word. However, as Rachelle Sawatsky (2007) has pointed out in relation to Mallett’s work, the final word is actually quite a lot more ambiguous. The library, as an institution charged with safeguarding the public interest, removes these books from circulation to erase marginalia and other signs from previous readers, before returning them to the stacks. Mallett’s photographs are then of notes and markings that are usually ephemeral, making the last word harder to claim for the author, the annotator, or the library. The photographer and her photographs enter into and reflect a cultural struggle over self-representation, the distribution of power and knowledge in education and the contradictions educators, artists and students face working within institutions—like schools, libraries and galleries—resistant to change.

The contrasting relation to the text as author or reader is referenced in a wonderful passage from the *Practice of Everyday Life*, where Michel de Certeau differentiates the practices of writing and reading:

Far from being writers—founders of their own place, heirs of the peasants of earlier ages now working on the soil of language, diggers of wells and builders of houses—readers are travelers; they move across lands belonging to someone else, like nomads poaching their way across fields they did not write, despoiling the wealth of Egypt to enjoy it themselves. Writing accumulates, stocks up, resists time by the establishment of a place and multiples its production through the expansionism of reproduction. Reading takes no measure against the erosion of time (one forgets oneself and also forgets), it does not keep what it acquires, or it does so poorly, and each of the places through which it passes is a repetition of the lost paradise. (1984: 174)

He draws a distinction between strategies and tactics. Briefly put, a strategy assumes a fixed, circumscribed place from which to relate to outside forces or entities. Determined by a historical-

ly specific configuration of rationality, a strategy is conservative, static and powerful. A “tactic” by contrast, “insinuates itself into the other’s place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance” (1984: xix). Marginalia and other signs of readers’ interactions with the text belong to the order of the tactic. They consist of calculated actions made “on the wing,” (1984: 38) making the most of opportunities as they arise. Innumerable manifestations and meanings are possible. Some marginal notes are spontaneous exclamations, moments that gesture towards a “knowledge in the making.” In Elizabeth Ellsworth’s usage, this may take the form of a sensation of being somewhere “in between thinking and feeling, of being in motion through space and time, between knowing and not knowing, in the space and time of learning as a lived experience with an open, unforeseeable future” (2005: 17). She uses D.W. Winnicott’s notion of “transitional space,” the interval of change from the person one has been to the person that one has yet to become and the time and place out of which experiences of the learning emerge (2005:17). Leaving little in the way of material evidence, this is a moment whose traces may subsist in the markings left behind in the margins of a reader’s books.

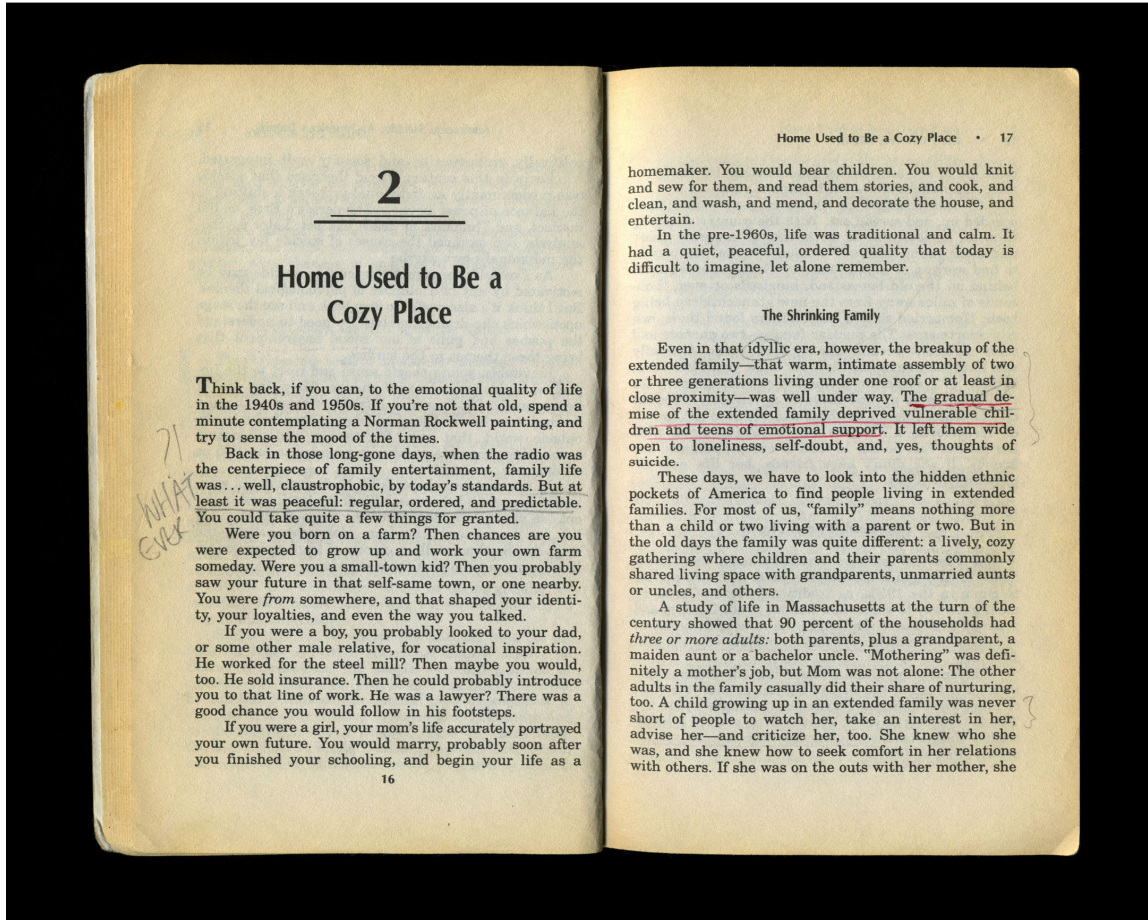
Other notes are less unguarded and express mediated interventions by those who wish to communicate their ideas about the text to themselves or to a later reader. They summarize, they instruct, and they critique. Still others attempt to score tactical hits in a hostile environment, suggestive of what Ellsworth has called “a noncompliant learning” (2005: 18). They reveal reading as a practice that can be rife with emotion, contestation and even fury (Oleksijczuk, 2007).

If, as Michel de Certeau (1984) argues, the act of reading has been mistakenly understood as merely passive consumption, the tactics revealed in Mallett’s photographs can be read as evidence of creative activity where none is expected to exist. Underlining, asterisks, exclamation marks, and margin notes are the hidden, silent, transgressive, ironic, angry or poetic activity of readers.

In the Margins/In the Photographs

Dr. David Bergman’s nostalgic rendering of family life in the 40’s and 50’s as peacefully regular, ordered, and predictable is disrupted by the loud “?! WHATEVER” in the margin of *Kids on the Brink*.

Figure 2



Kids on the Brink, 2006

6 lightjet prints

each 17" × 20 1/2"

Courtesy the Rennie Collection

The dismissive tone, the annoyed look; eyes rolled back, slight sneer, raised eyebrows, shoulder shrug are perceptible in the impertinent single word. A seemingly simple word, it is a declaration that effectively undermines the authority of the expert medical doctor. Perhaps all the more unsettling to the socially authorized legitimacy of Bergman's truth claims, is that given that the book is in a public library, the anonymous critic is very likely to have been a student. Professionals and intellectuals are, suggests de Certeau, privileged readers who produce legitimate readings that become orthodoxy and whose interpretations render other readings insignificant and easily rejected. The text becomes a cultural weapon—the pretext for a law that legitimizes certain interpretations over others. Libraries could be seen as the physical and material manifestation of the hierarchy of knowledges. If professionals and intellectuals are experts whose readings are validated, a “good” student's interpretive reading is meant to acquiesce. Inventiveness within compliance is the difficult balancing act that is expected, demanded.

?! WHATEVER's meanings are however, not altogether clear. Is the critic disdainful of an older generation's pontifications on their own times? Is s/he dissenting on the valuing of peaceful, ordered and predictable lives? The photograph opens the question of what meanings the reader has made of the text and in doing so initiates its own readers into a realizing of a text's capacity of producing an indefinite plurality of meanings, including Mallett's own. The work suggests a politics of literacy that insists on reading that "eludes the law of information" (de Certeau: 173). It shows us instead that authorial authority is anything but absolute. Readers use the space of a text to weave and re-weave its filaments, creatively inventing something that is perhaps altogether different from what an author "intends." The presence of marginalia in library books renders visible two literate systems. Sanctioned literacies that are recognized, circulated and approved by adults in authority and a literate underlife which refuses in some way to accept the official view, practices designed and enacted to challenge and disrupt official explanations (Finders, 1997: 24).

In observing that writing notes in response to text appears to be a habit acquired at schools, H.J. Jackson (2002) reminds us that as well as revealing the cracks in cultural orthodoxies, marginalia might also be seen as part of the practices that are used to constitute oneself as being a certain kind of student, learner, and reader. "Think about light and/or darkness," reads a note in a photograph of Emily Carr's memoir. And, "Emily goes through quite a lot to get her sketches," reads another by the same annotator. In this instance, marginalia may be the before of the research paper, the mid-term exam, or the class lecture. An attentive, earnest reader is revealed. Students develop stylized techniques and preferred technologies for their margin notes: Repeated motifs, signature doodles, favorite pencils, high lighters, pens, and sticky notes, whose use, mis-use or absence may be read as expressions of the everyday practices of shaping and producing oneself as "student." These sometimes obtuse markings are the transitional contact points between one context and another, one person and another, and between knowing and not-knowing.

The pink, heart-shaped notes and inflected exclamation marks covering over the text of *The Montreal Massacre*, create a visual poem to the possibilities of combining femininity with feminism—phenomenon which until third wave feminism were in tension with each other.

Figure 3



The Montreal Massacre, 2006

4 lightjet prints
each 19" × 24 1/2"
Courtesy the artist

The dainty, careful writing on removable notes that have nonetheless not been removed before the book is returned to the library tell a story that might entail an ambivalent relation to the marking of a text with one's own words. One note emanates with the excitement of discovery, "WOW!" This is a response that the reader/writer may want to house in the text that incited it: An affecting response to an impertinent text. Here there seems to be a readerly alignment with the author, both are united against patriarchal readings of the killing of women at the Ecole Polytechnique and the media's attempts at containing feminist critique. "Church & State sanctioned violence against women," reads another pretty note, the piercing words incongruous with their delivery on a pink heart. There are, it seems, gendered valences to textual legitimacy. In this instance the text itself participates in a counter-cultural insurgency seeking to re-write the marginalized relations between women, authority and knowledge. The note leaver, presumably a young woman, embraces this resistant reading of the Massacre. The notes which lay over the type-written words rendering them un-readable, gesture towards a writing and re-writing of self, space, time and the dialogic creation of meaning. As an act of literacy, they perform a tangible sense of power.

Dennis Sumera (2001) has noted that not enough attention is paid to understanding how the very act of reading becomes immersed in a complex set of cultural activities that participates in the ongoing conditioning of personal and cultural knowledge and understanding (170). Kyla

Mallett's photographs gesture towards an understanding of reading not as a private activity, but a social one. That is, reading is represented as an "interactive" experience. As those writing in the reader-response movement have been articulating for some time, "meaning is not something to be found in the text. It is rather, an entity produced by the reader in conjunction with the text's structure" (Finders, 1997:10). Reading is an initiation into a set of shared codes of communication. Readers are obliged to recognize and negotiate their way around the conventions of writing, just as writers are obliged to work within a structure of conventions. Many of the tacit codes can, according to Jackson (2002), be inferred from readers' marginalia, addressed as they are to the author, themselves, or to another reader.

Marginalia, Mallett's photographs suggest, render visible the social hierarchy concealed in the practice of reading. They are the traces left behind by a practice that slips through all sorts of "writings" and prohibitions. They mark the site where social inequalities, resistance and poetics intersect. They illustrate how literary engagements can function as archival sites for creative and critical interpretation. Then again, sometimes they may just be a *recherché* way to wile away a rainy day.

About the Author

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