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# Moving Margins: Using Marginalia as a Tool for Critical Reflection

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## Moving Margins

### Using Marginalia as a Tool for Critical Reflection

Patricia Alvarez McHatton, Sandy May

**Abstract** Marginalia is the practice of writing notes in the margins of texts as a way to capture ones' thoughts and feelings about the text during reading. It is the giving in to the impulse, based on what was read, to stop and record a comment. In this manuscript, we make the connection between marginalia and the visceral responses to text felt by one doctoral student (the second author) taking a course examining language as a "place of struggle" (hooks, 2004, p. 153). We also demonstrate how marginalia can be used as a qualitative method to document and investigate the way textual interaction facilitates learning. A found poem developed from the marginalia compiled throughout the semester is shared exemplifying the way a critical analysis of personal marginalia can facilitate awareness of transformative processes and highlighting the margins as a transformative space.

Keywords: *marginalia, found poems, reflection*

## What I Learned (by Sandy May)

Pink marginalia scribbles  
Cheap French fries.  
I am stunned, horrified, embarrassed  
Guilty, culpable, responsible  
One of THEM  
Devaluing people just because  
Heartsick.  
Disillusioned in my seeing.  
Wishing I could not-see again.  
Passionate discussions of critical issues.  
Americanism or separatism,  
Code switching, forced assimilation  
Because WE said, YOU must.

Another chance to fail  
 Another chance to blame the victim.  
 Reading stories, sharing experiences  
 When family language isn't school language  
 When unfamiliar words are practiced in public  
 Competent people made to feel Weak, Anxious, Different  
 Their language is no longer Private, Separate, Special  
 Another trauma. Another loss  
 Family roles shift becoming  
 More like us, but still—the other.  
 Unable to maintain dual identities  
 A choice is made, bringing new feelings  
 Betrayal, Guilt, Envy, Acceptance  
 Language has been wielded as a weapon  
 To separate US from THEM.  
 Politics of intolerance are  
 Built on the voices speaking the  
 Legitimate language of the dominant sphere  
 Red flags announce to those in power that you are not one of US  
 Biased perceptions of individuals and groups  
 Racist systems with social, political, and economic ties  
 I want to tell my daughter, this is  
 "Unequal, unjust, UNACCEPTABLE,"  
 But I have been taught to not see, not speak  
 I have benefited from my loyalty to the power structure  
 From the cultural collateral that comes from being white.  
 She shares that with me  
 The blessing that burdens the aware.  
 And I am asked, "Does she get it?"  
 And still the angry voices warn about THEM  
 Pushing us to divide and conquer all "others"  
 By feeding the fear and building the need to protect "American" ways,  
 Teaching that white nativism correlates to patriotism  
 Maintaining power at all cost.  
 Education claims,  
 That everyone is treated the same  
 Testing occurs using "neutral" tools

NCLB, AYP, Accountability ensure fairness.  
 Full of slippery language and double speak,  
 "Buzzwords" eventually accepted as normal,  
 But still not describing reality.  
 Class perpetuation through ignorance and word games  
 Domination through physical control and policies  
 Groups exploited by teachers and administrators  
 How to compare Schools, People, Power?  
 When school success = forced cultural suicide yet  
 Optimists talk of emancipation, social responsibility, justice, but  
 Are we ready to see ourselves in the Face of the Enemy?  
 To be revealed as homophobic, racist, sexist, classist, anti-Semitic, ableist?  
 Do we possess the weapon of the spirit?  
 Despite our heroic ideals, we often act in distinctly unheroic ways.  
 Allowing the media to drive what is known.  
 And not question the power structure.  
 But we can try—  
 To teach political context for learning  
 To read the world in the word  
 To find the barbaric images hidden in victory celebrations.  
 To expose racism, domination, and subordination  
 Denounce discriminatory school and classroom contexts  
 We might redeem ourselves.  
 Engaging in the practice of ethics  
 While engaging in the practice of education.  
 Go back to the margins

## Context

hooks (2004) defines language as "a place of struggle" (p. 153), the epicenter of attempted communication, through the language of the privileged, between those who are marginalized and those who are in positions of privilege. As part of a doctoral seminar, we explored the power of language and how it is used to control and maintain the status quo. Further, we examined English as a privileged tongue, a source of social and cultural collateral. The goal of the seminar was to situate students at this place of struggle (p.153) and within that struggle engage them in purposeful interaction with the readings through marginalia—the practice of using text margins as a space for meaningful conversations with the self.

Jackson (2001) provides an accounting of marginalia spanning three centuries. Within his text, he describes the features of annotated books and discusses motives for engaging in marginalia, both public and private. Public use of marginalia provides examples of contemporary responses to significant works and serves as a historical accounting of social and cultural rituals (Golick, 2004). Privately, marginalia demands the reader give in to the impulse to stop long enough to record a comment. The main function is self-awareness, “tracing the development of the reader’s self-definition in and by relation to the text” (Jackson, 2010, p. 87). It was this development and (re)defining of the self that I hoped for in my students throughout the seminar.

As the semester came to an end, participants designed their culminating presentation, an arts-based reflection of what they had learned throughout the semester. For this project, Sandy had compiled all of her marginalia from our course readings throughout the semester, coded it, sorted it thematically, and developed a found poem reflecting her thinking about her thinking about her thinking—marginalia as qualitative method and metacognitive strategy.

### Moving Margins

As I reread Sandy’s prose, I recalled hooks’ (1990) vision of marginality as “much more than a site of deprivation; in fact . . . it is also the site of radical possibility, a space of resistance” (p. 341). Although her focus is on individuals who have been historically marginalized or oppressed, hooks’ (2004) concept of the margins as a space where “we can begin the process of re-vision” (p. 153) is pertinent to Sandy’s work. The margins in which Sandy meticulously inscribed her journey of self-awareness became her site of radical possibility; it is where she found her self anew and, more importantly, where she was able to critically examine her complicity in the perpetuation of the status quo. The margin became a third space, a purposeful place that allowed her to examine her own subjectivities and identities, to “look from the outside in and from the inside out” (hooks, 2004, p. 156) and to imagine or improvise new worlds of possibility. By willingly moving into the margins, Sandy was afforded a panoramic view from which to consider and critically examine existing practices. Sandy celebrated her new found marginality and valued the margins as a place where she could grapple with the texts and juxtapose what she was learning with her lived experience. The confluence of these factors allowed her to become intimate with the metanarrative as she imagined a counternarrative, the realization of which demanded her participation.

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## About the Authors

Patricia Alvarez McHatton is professor and chair of the Inclusive Education Department at the Bagwell College of Education at Kennesaw State University. Her research interests include teacher education with an emphasis on preparing culturally responsive educators, school experiences of marginalized youth and families, and engaging disenfranchised youth in participatory action research. Of prime importance in her work is making research findings accessible to the communities in which the research is undertaken.

Sandy May is a doctoral candidate at the University of South Florida in Tampa, Florida. She is an exceptional student education specialist for the District School Board of Pasco County with responsibilities in the areas of legal compliance, Child Find, and meeting facilitation. She also serves as the program coordinator for all Gifted and Hospital Homebound services.