

# Exploring Marginalia: The Intersection Between Reading and Cognition

Samuel Kamara

In this article, Kamara talks about how margin notes help interface between reading and understanding. Moreover, he examines the genre features of marginalia as texts that are produced from our reading of other texts.

## *Marginalia'*

*Sometimes the notes are ferocious, skirmishes against the author  
raging along the borders of every page in tiny black script.*

*If I could just get my hands on you, Kierkegaard, or Conor  
Cruise O'Brien, they seem to say,*

*I would bolt the door and beat some logic into your head.*

*Other comments are more offhand, dismissive – “Nonsense.” “Please!” “HA!!” –  
that kind of thing. . . .*

*—Billy Collins*

When I came to the U.S. of A in 2010, I suddenly realized that my set of reading skills were quite different than what was expected of me in most of my courses. I would read the assigned readings for my classes feeling confident that I had fully “understood” those essays, but in class, I would be unable to relate what I thought I had understood during discussions. Something was, indeed, terribly wrong, either with my reading skills, or more significantly, with the fact that I was unfamiliar with the ways this new U.S. culture constructed meaning. I certainly had to re-learn how to read my textbooks and assigned essays in order for me to confidently take part in class discussions and write “acceptable” essays. I realized that reading does not only entail gleaning “facts,” but also interacting and dialoguing with texts in ways that produce multiple and sometimes hidden meanings. In order to achieve this, I developed the skill of writing my thoughts and impressions of the passages I read in the margins of my textbooks and essays. I would

highlight important paragraphs or sentences and then write down what I thought the authors were saying or implying. Now, after having done this for a while, I also realize that these thoughts, impressions, or feelings that I sometimes write in the margins of my textbooks are actually a kind of text—a genre—that does a lot of things. Bill Collins’ poem, “Marginalia,” quoted above, illustrates the intriguing nature of this genre. Even though they are intensely personal texts—that is, each writer has his/her own unique way of inscribing marginalia—they do conform to broad genre requirements such as content, context, language, purpose, and audience. The example below illustrates how margin notes are generated from other texts:

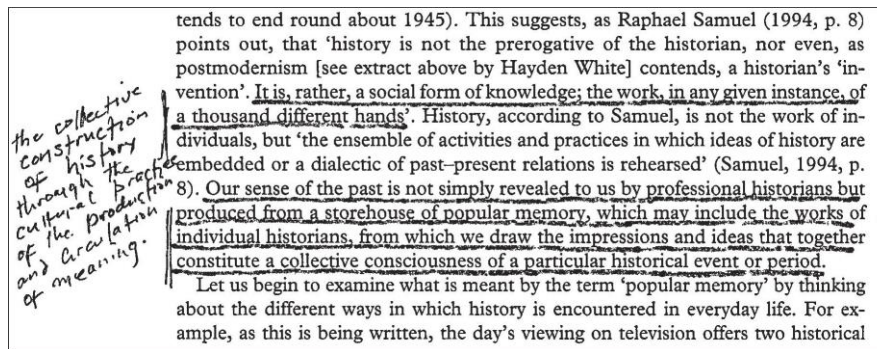


Figure 1. Margin notes paraphrasing the main idea of the underlined sentence.<sup>2</sup>

Before discussing their genre function, let us start by defining marginalia. Marginalia are scribbles, comments, and illustrations in the margins of a book or essay (see Figure 1, above, for an example). They come in many forms, such as smileys, doodles, paraphrases, comments, strokes and marks, and unintelligible letters suggestive of different emotional states. One must make a distinction here between marginalia (what is written in the margins of a text), and highlighting (underlining the passage or sentence that speaks directly to the margin notes). Most writers highlight the portion of the text that gives rise to the marginalia. In whatever forms they appear, marginalia always come as a result of our interaction with texts. They are the inscriptions on the various margins of a page—top, bottom, left, or right—that point to the fact that another reader, or other readers, have engaged with such a material before us. This then fixes the context of marginalia to an already written text. Also, because they are derived from such a written text, they do help construct the identity of the reader(s) who produces them. They allude to the state of mind of the reader while reading the text.

They also reinforce the reading style of close or interactive reading over skimming or reading for pleasure. Such reading styles signal the purpose of marginalia. Their purposes are interaction and cognition. The reader who produces marginalia while reading a text wants to interact with such

a text in ways that will enhance an understanding of its content. And to understand something is to also have the capacity to remember that thing. Although someone can understand and forget, memory does solidify our understanding of things. So, in this sense, we can say that, first and foremost, the audience of marginalia is the reader who produces them. His or her marginalia serve as roadmaps for tracking his or her interaction with a text and the important ideas gleaned from such an interaction. However, in cases where such marginalia are intelligible, the second or subsequent readers of a text can also be the audience. The marginalia of a previous reader can help shape the understanding of a subsequent reader or provide the basis for the forming of opinions that may be different from those of the previous reader. Otherwise, in cases where they are unintelligible, they can become texts needing mediation by subsequent readers.

Let us, then, focus for the remainder of this article on showing how marginalia serve as an interface between reading and understanding. As I have mentioned above, when we adopt certain styles of reading, such as close reading, interactive reading, or reading for meaning, we do so because we want to reach a solid understanding of the contents of the texts we are interacting with. Thus, the marginalia that come out of such close readings are reflective of the process involved in reaching that understanding. Indeed, cognition is not an act, but an outcome derived from a process. This idea is beautifully captured by Wassmann when she defines cognition as “a conclusion, which prepares itself in unconscious process and which comes to awareness only in the form of the final result.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, for us to reach an understanding about something, we must go through the process of questioning, forming opinions, agreeing or disagreeing, and expressing frustrations with difficulties along the way. And one of the ways in which we realize all of these in reading is through marginalia. This is not to suggest that cognition cannot be reached without marginalia. We must bear in mind that cognition is not just derived from reading, but touching, smelling, tasting, and hearing, too—sometimes from a multiple use of the senses as well.

In order for us to understand how marginalia dramatize the process of cognition, let us consider those marginalia that express different emotional states in our engagements with a text. Let us recall those moments when we found certain portions of our texts difficult to understand and think of what we wrote in those moments on the margins of those texts. Those marginalia that we produced in those moments constitute part of the process of understanding those texts. They help us form opinions about whether the contents of the texts we are reading are difficult or easy. Such opinions form part of the meaning of what we are reading. At other times, such margin comments serve as roadmaps to indicate specific portions of our texts that

require a second or even a third reading. Indeed, the conclusions we reach in the end, whether we like or dislike a particular text, are highly dependent on our emotional experiences with such a text. Our emotions are our unconscious decisions and subjective opinions that we reach as we engage with a text. This is why it is possible for two different readers to read the same text and come out with two different understandings of such a text.

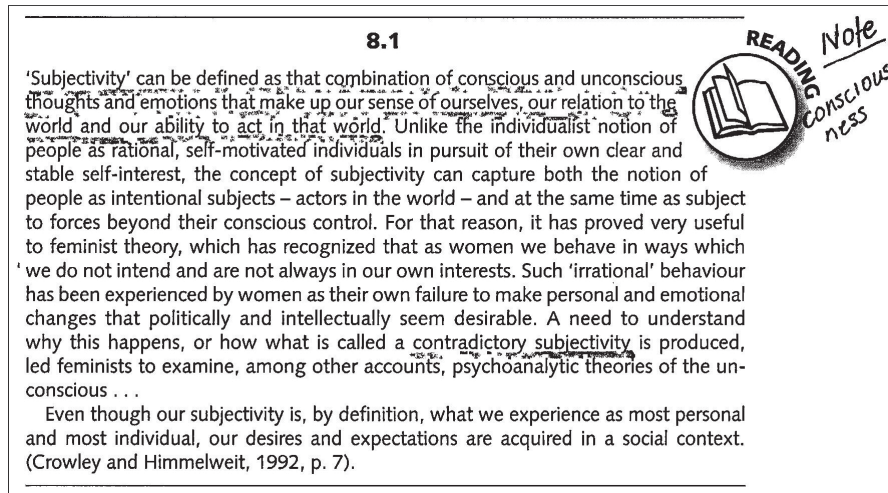


Figure 2. Using old knowledge to understand something new.<sup>4</sup>

Another way in which marginalia interface between reading and cognition is by creating a link between previous and new knowledge. The way we acquire knowledge is incremental. We keep on adding new knowledge to old knowledge. Sometimes, also, we use old knowledge to understand new knowledge. I remember reading a very dense text that was trying to explain the cultural theory concept of subjectivity (see Figure 2, above). The concept was new to me and it was the very first time I was coming across a word like that. But I had come across similar words that sounded or looked like this particular word I was finding difficulty with. These are words like subject, subjected, and subjection. I first tried to establish the links between these words I knew before and the concept of subjectivity. Such links were not readily obvious. So I read the paragraph again and realized that the concept is linked with Sigmund Freud's theory of the id, ego, and super-ego, and Jacques Lacan's idea of the ways in which language shapes our self-consciousness. Aha! Now I had gotten another word, "consciousness," which can serve as a synonym for "subjectivity." So I wrote the word "consciousness" in the margin of the paragraph that talked about subjectivity.

I had actually got my "aha moment," but then I began to wonder: how is subjectivity related to its sister words such as subject, subjected, and

subjection? I realized that the word “subjected” is the verb form of the noun “subjection.” They both mean to put something or someone under the control or power of another thing. So they are one and the same words. The other word, “subject,” has a meaning that is connected to subjectivity. In grammar, “subjects” are nouns or pronouns that determine the action of a sentence. “Subjects” can also refer to people who are under the control of a sovereign government). Thus, a *subject* is a person, and the suffix “ivity” turns the word into another noun that refers to the thoughts of a person or something existing in his or her mind. Conversely, we also become *subjected* to forces in society that help shape our self-consciousness. Now where is this leading us? It is leading us to the conclusion that our self-consciousness, or the way we become conscious of who we are in society, is dependent on the social forces we are subjected to and our conscious thoughts about ourselves made available to us in language. But what about our sub-conscious thoughts about ourselves? Don’t they form part of our self-consciousness? Yes, they do. Now the meaning of subjectivity is clear. Subjectivity is our conscious and unconscious perceptions of ourselves brought about by language and the social and political forces to which we are subjected. However, it would have been difficult for me to reach that understanding without my prior knowledge of the word “consciousness” or “self-consciousness” and my use of marginalia to make those connections.

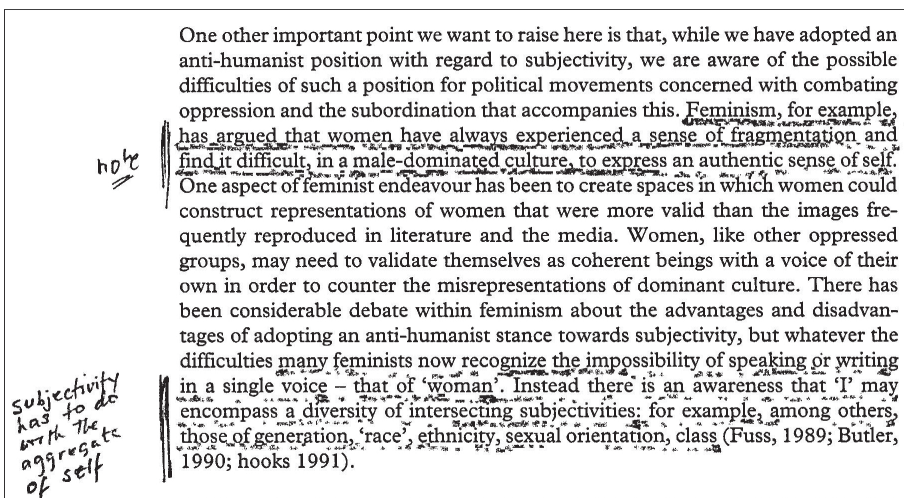


Figure 3. Brief notes summarizing a highlighted idea.<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, sometimes marginalia that summarize the central thought of each paragraph in an essay can help the reader plot a reverse outline of the essay (see Figure 3, above, for an example). This reverse outline actually constitutes the structure of the essay and oftentimes the argument of the essay. Thus a consistent use of marginalia can help the reader reach a profound understanding of the main arguments of an essay. A general rule about essay

writing suggests that each paragraph of an essay should develop a single idea, and a constant gleaning of those single ideas should help produce a general impression of the essay and provide an insight into the thought process of the writer when writing that particular essay.

The genre of marginalia is rich in its potential. It represents our conscious efforts to get to the bottom of the rich meaning(s) of texts. Different readers produce different markings or inscriptions in the margins of texts that represent the various ways that these readers engage in meaning-making as they read. However, no matter the differences in style, inscriptions, or markings of readers, these margin notes or strokes are themselves texts that are located in the intersection between reading and cognition.

### Endnotes

1. Collins, B. (2005). Marginalia. In *Billy Collins: Complete resource for Billy Collins poems, books, and readings*. Retrieved from <http://www.billy-collins.com/2005/06/marginalia.html>. The epigraph for this article is an excerpt from Collins' poem; the entire poem is available on the website listed here.
2. Giles, J., & Middleton, T. (1999). *Studying culture: A practical introduction*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 92.
3. Wassmann, C. (2008). Psychological optics, cognition and emotion: A new look at early work of Wilhelm Wundt. *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences*, 64(2), 236.
4. Giles, J., & Middleton, T. *Studying culture*, 191.
5. Giles, J., & Middleton, T. *Studying culture*, 192.





Samuel Kamara is a second year Ph.D. student here at ISU. His research interests are postcolonial feminism, postcolonial and diaspora studies, global literatures, cultural studies, and trauma theory. He enjoys fishing and taking naps. Since coming to America, he has been fascinated by how people from other cultures deal with the problem of neo-cultural cognition. His pet research is cross-cultural cognition in diasporic spaces