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Making Meaning at the Margins: Learning from Margara Averbach

Reading, researching, and writing about social justice would be excruciatingly difficult and painful if we did not meet kindred souls along the way. The road we walk is long, and the way is hard, but the journey gives us the great gift of accompaniment by people we deeply respect. For me, Margara Averbach has been one of the people who have made the journey joyful and fulfilling. She is an insightful reader, an engaging and accessible writer, and a profoundly original and generative thinker. Like most credentialed scholars, she displays exceptional expertise about her objects of study. Those of us who have been privileged to learn with her and from her, however, have benefited not only from what she knows but also from how she knows. Her epistemological innovations enable us to ask and answer complex questions that generate new knowledge and help deepen our

collective capacity for democratic self-determination.

I first met Averbach at an American Studies conference in Atibiaia, Brazil in January of 1997. For those of us from the United States, attendance at international meetings is both necessary and challenging. It is necessary as a way to engage in scholarly conversations and exchanges that can help us rise above the parochialism of our world, to escape the confines of a national chauvinist and monolingual educational system, to live for just a moment outside the pervasive presence of the unbridled commercialism in our society that treats material goods as more valuable than people, and to speak directly to and to hear from the global polity that has suffered unjustly because of the military and economic hegemony of the United States. These meetings are challenging at the same time, however, because they inevitably involve mistrust, misunderstandings, and miscommunications. Our hosts around the world know that the United States government has long deployed scholarly and cultural exchanges as forums for propaganda, and as opportunities to gather intelligence about actual and potential real or imagined opponents of the U.S. empire. We attract suspicion for good reasons. From our perspective, however, this history also means that the scholars we meet with overseas have often been carefully vetted by U.S. authorities and their allies in host country governments, that some of the interlocutors we encounter

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Barrelhouse, *Footsteps in the Dark*, *A Life in the Struggle*, *Time Passages*, *Dangerous Crossroads*, *American Studies in a Moment of Danger*, *Rainbow at Midnight*, *Sidewalks of St. Louis*, *Class & Culture in Cold War America* y *How Racism Takes Place*.

are employed as or are auditioning for positions as agents of counter-insurgency, and that anything that is discussed is likely to be reported to some government functionary. Even when government security apparatuses are not in play, exasperation abounds. Scholars located outside the U.S, have become accustomed to the ignorance and arrogance of U.S. academics who know little about the rest of the world and care less, who do not realize that we play a role in discursively posing the dominant particulars of North America as universal truths. Even the adjective “American” attached to our studies assumes that America is a country, not a hemisphere. We have been trained to downplay the hard facts of Indigenous dispossession in perpetuity, slavery unwilling to die, and empire as a way of life. Instead, until recently, the canon of American Studies scholarship has portrayed the ideals of republicanism, abolitionism, and democratic pluralism as the essence of the national story. That means that scholars outside of the U.S. who become involved in American Studies research often do so for idealistic but unfounded reasons. The Cold War and its aftermath have left some of them convinced that the U.S has been an island of virtue in a global sea of corruption, and that the U.S. economic and social system offers the only viable alternative to despotisms of the left and the right. They expect us to confirm their illusions and are disappointed that we find the usable core of the national experience to reside instead in the underground, in alternative academies, in interstices, and in the margins.

All of these contradictions were clearly on display at the 1997 conference in Atibaia. The presentations by scholars based in Europe

and North America generally did not portray conquest, colonization, slavery, or imperialism as formative or enduring features of U.S. culture. The papers that were delivered focused on canonical works of literature in English and in the process generally evaded the multilingual history of North America. Participants from the United States and the United Kingdom were largely monolingual English speakers, while attendees from Brazil and neighboring countries made presentations and conducted conversations that moved smoothly across Portuguese, Spanish, and English. Some of the Brazilian scholars referred to anti-Black racism as a parochial problem of the United States that contrasted radically with their own country which they positioned as a racial democracy. Yet at this very conference, nearly all of the presenters were light skinned while the staff that served the food and cleaned the rooms was noticeably darker. Scholars from Brazil prompted by stories carried on CNN commiserated with those of us from North America about the allegedly irrational desire of teachers, parents, and students in the Oakland school district to have African American English treated with respect as a culturally grounded linguistic system. We did not succeed in convincing them of our belief in the legitimacy of those demands.

Yet in the midst of the predictable miscommunications that predominated at this meeting, Margara Averbach stood out with a different voice that reflected a different way of approaching American Studies. In her own presentation about Indigeneity in the U.S., and in her comments, queries, and conversations throughout the meeting, Averbach exemplified the value of speaking

from the margins and resisting the impulse to compress the infinitely plural, diverse, and contradictory forms of expressive culture in the U.S. into one story told from one point of view.

Over the years, I would come to see Averbach advance this way of thinking in many different venues, not only as a scholar of North American Indigeneity but also as a newspaper literary critic, an essayist, a translator, an author of books for young readers, a presenter of research at campus colloquia, and as an indefatigable interlocutor at scholarly meetings and online. Her imagination, initiative, and energy are remarkable parts of her individual persona, but they have added meaning because of the epistemological commitment that she described in an infinitely generative article published in 2000 in *American Studies International* as working at the place where multiple margins meet at the bridge¹. In that article, and in nearly all of her writings, Averbach acknowledges the injuries and exclusions that place people at the margins and that deny them access to the centers of discourse and centers of power.

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Yet in a deft dialectical move, she also shows that the margins can be places where the blinders come off, where it is possible to look in many different directions at once, where the hurts of history compel members of aggrieved groups to face up to facts that more privileged people can avoid and evade. She is not interested in the margins because they are odd, eccentric, non-normative, or outside the parameters of power. On the contrary, she is interested in a critical marginality, in a marginality that is the scene of agency. The margins matter to her because they are “places where it is possible to talk back to the center of power and challenge its assumptions”².

Averbach’s meditations about margins flow from her positionalities in relation to a wide range of social institutions, all of which can position her as something of an outsider. She is a woman and mother in an academic world that remains decidedly misogynist, a scholar who studies the cultural history of the United States from vantage point in Argentina, and an expert on Indigenous culture who is not Indigenous. Canonical scholars may regard her as overly concerned

¹ Margara Averbach. “Crossings: Multiple Margins Meet on the Bridge.” *American Studies International*. v. 38 n.3 (2000), 63-71.

² Idem, page 64.

with race, while raced people may worry she may not be focused enough on it. Her colleagues in Latin America sometimes charge that any focus on the United States reinforces its imperial hegemony, while U.S. based scholars dismiss or patronize her as a “foreigner” lacking organic understanding. The salary available to her as an academic in Argentina requires her to take on outside employment as a journalist and translator, a necessity that is not shared by most of her North American colleagues. She is thus shaped by many different marginalities that are both different from and similar to the marginal authors and artists whom she studies in her research. Averbach notes that being in these marginal places is definitely not pleasant, but she insists that “disadvantageous, even lethal places, can be standpoints for richer, deeper visions³. Rather than being cathected onto the injuries or bemoaning the outsider status she incurs from these marginal positions, Averbach chooses to use her own marginalities as a point of entry into arguments and analyses that recognize that every scholar, author, and artist speaks from some social location, that truth is relative, provisional, and contingent, and that knowledge is partial, perspectival and interested. She is a translator in the literal sense when she creates Spanish language versions of English language texts, but those acts of mediating between languages also serve as a rich rehearsal of other acts of interpretation and translation across cultures and communities.

The issues that come to the fore in Averbach’s research revolve around epistemologies of

erasure. Her seemingly wide expanse of diffuse experiences and research objects encompasses gender, race, class, nationality, coloniality, and Indigeneity, but all of these topics cohere clearly around the ways in which the hurts of history and the ideas of the injured disappear in dominant discourse. She explains how research enabled her to discern that ethnic issues and women’s issues were connected to each other and to her places in the academy in the world. This is not simply because gender and race intersect in the lives of individuals, but rather that the place where issues of social identities and power come together is “where they are denied, are not seen by the center”⁴. Yet while the center refuses to notice the margins, people on the margins must discern what is happening at the center and must oppose it. In Averbach’s view “otherness” stems not from the intrinsic qualities of those on the margins, but is instead a social construction fabricated by powerful people at the center to hide the ways in which they profit from exploitation, exclusion, and oppression. That erasure requires the silenced, the shunned, the segregated to fight back with the tools they have in the arenas that are open to them. Averbach asserts that “one of my aims as a teacher of literature has been to make the consequences of marginalization evident, visible⁵.

Averbach’s epistemological commitments have political causes and consequences. Her positionality as an American Studies scholar located in Latin America draws her attention to the mendacity of the vision of the United States that is disseminated throughout the

³ *Ibidem*, page 66.

⁴ *Ibidem*, page 66.

⁵ *Ibidem*, page 64.

world. Her deep engagement with texts authored by women, especially those from Indigenous, raced, and ethnic communities leads her to conclude that “the representation of the United States being promoted and exported to Latin American countries is a simple, binary based, false version of an unreal world where the margin (including women) is extremely dangerous and should be destroyed or does not exist at all”⁶. Here Averbach discerns correctly that white supremacy and misogyny in the United States are not aberrant exceptions to a national history of inclusion, but rather manifestations of the murderous and eliminationist counter-subversive consciousness at the very core of the nation’s culture, economy, and political system. This recognition encapsulates what the margins have learned from the center from centuries of displacement and dispossession of exclusion and exploitation.

Yet people at the margins know about much more than the depredations of the center. At the margins of a world that routinely makes people unloved and unlovable they find something left to love in themselves and others. They turn segregation into congregation. In their hands the toxic becomes the tonic, and poison becomes transformed into medicine. Humiliation becomes a precursor to honor. Because people at the margins suffer collectively from a linked fate, no individual escape or evasion will suffice. They must act in concert to address injuries that are collective, cumulative, and continuing. Averbach shows

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that they replace the isolated “I” of oppression with the organized “we” in struggle⁷. She contends that in both feminist studies and ethnic studies scholarship, the central challenge is “to go towards an idea of society where the “I” is not separate but connected to, dependent on the world and others”⁸.

For those of us conducting American Studies scholarship in North America, Averbach’s work is a crucial resource, a magisterial compendium of knowledge about Indigenous expressive culture to be sure, but also a provocation to rethink the horizontal axes of margins and centers and link them to the vertical axes of oppression and suppression. Like other scholars based outside the U.S. such as Alessandro Portelli, Celeste-Marie Bernier, and Kazuyo Tsuchiya, Averbach provides us with crucial insights about a culture that is often so familiar to us that we don’t recognize its full contours. At the same time, she joins with U.S. based feminist and critical race theorists Kimberlé Crenshaw, Chela Sandoval, and Sumi Cho to discern

⁶ Ibidem, page 69.

⁷ Márgara Averbach, “Leonard Peltier Writes About His Years in a U.S. Prison: My Life is My Sun Dance as a

Literary Text.” *Kalfou* v3 issue 1 (Spring), 2016. 109-124.

⁸ Márgara Averbach. “Crossings...”, *op. cit.*, page 67.

where and why the margins matter and to help us see which differences make a difference and when.

Averbach's work often reminds me of a line in one of Toni Cade Bambara's characteristically brilliant and generative essays. She describes her life's mission as "raising above my training, thinking better than I've been taught, developing a listening habit, making the self-available to intelligence, engaging in demystification, and seeking out teachers at every turn"⁹. Averbach shows us that we can find those teachers among the ranks of the shunned, the silenced, the segregated, and the suppressed, but also among our colleagues who recognize the increasingly indecent conditions the world imposes on us but who refuse to give up or give in. For me, she has been one of those people, a teacher who showed up in my life unexpectedly at a meeting far from my home, and whose imagination, ideas, evidence, and arguments have graced it ever since.

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⁹ Bambara, Toni Cade. "What It Is I Think I Am Doing Anyhow," in Janet Sternberg, ed., *The Writer on Her Work*. New York: Norton, 1992, page 155.