Learning to talk back

"The only war that matters is the war against the imagination.
All other wars are subsumed by it."
—Diane Di Prima, "Rant," from Pieces of a Song

During the recent cycle of international protests against the privatization of education (2011), some students protected themselves from the police using plastic shields decorated with book covers sporting titles from classic literature and philosophical texts. The Book Blocs provided a stunning image that went viral across the globe, allegorically narrating the performative encounter between the state and the multitudes as one between the repressive violence of batons and the liberating/protecting potency of knowledge. But the image of the Book Blocs could also be mis-read in another way. The most stunning elements of this visual representation of what's wrong with the education system were the bodies of the young people beyond the blown-up book covers, being exposed, perhaps for the first time in their young lives, to the systemic violence that sustains the expectations of feeling protected by erudition, a violence that is more often directed elsewhere, on different kinds of populations who would not necessarily be familiar with de Beauvoir or Deleuze. As the cardboard shields came apart in the struggles against law enforcement, perhaps a new kind of knowledge became possible, a different way of learning, together, about the embodied vulnerability of freedom of thought, and of the links between thinking, relating and acting. Looking at the images of police breaking the giant books covers apart, I wonder how the feeling of their claws on the students’ hooded jackets modified the meaning of Beckett and Huxley for them. How do we know when it is time to read and when it is time to stop reading, when reading needs to re-become a mean and not an end? When does knowledge take up the form of a shield from reality, it can function as an alibi to postpone feeling implicated with an issue and letting ourselves be touched by life, becoming responsible towards those other bodies with whom we are not connected via a textual thelos.

We are often advised: it is good to read. But what if we are swopping the means with the ends? What if reading should not be held as the ultimate value, but it is simply the more common, visible signpost for something else that goes on, and perhaps has to go on, to a certain extent, unmarked? Statistical studies show that people are generally happier when they read. However, what these study found is merely a correlation between the state of wellbeing and the activity of reading. Could it be that reading is a gateway to experiencing otherwise, that is, to learning, but to learn without being taught, and it is that which makes readers increase their joy?

1 See Cesmer and Università Roma 3, La felicità di leggere, statistical study commissioned by GeMS, 2015; and Ceridewen Dovey, 'Can Reading Make You Happier?', The New Yorker, June 9, 2015. Available at: http://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/can-reading-make-you-happier (accessed 30th October 2015).
The Talking Book

In 1772 Mr. James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, an African-born former slave in the English towns of Colchester and Kidderminster, wrote the autobiography of his life. In what was to become one of the foundational documents of Black English literature, Gronniosaw included a powerful anecdote from his life as a slave, which became known in literature studies as the Talking Book trope. His master, he recalls,

used to read prayers in public to the ship’s crew every Sabbath day; and when I first saw him read, I was never so surprised in my life, as when I saw the book talk to my master; for I thought it did, as I observed him to look upon it, and move his lips.—I wished it would do so with me. As soon as my master had done reading I follow’d him to the place where he put the book, being mightily delighted with it, and when nobody saw me, I open’d it, and put my ear down close upon it, in great hope that it wou’d say something to me; but I was very sorry and greatly disappointed, when I found it would not speak, this thought immediately presented itself to me, that every body and every thing despis’d me because I was black.

The situation describe in this passage is paradigmatic on many different intersecting levels: it allegorically illustrates the introjection of racism on the part of slaves; the relationship between knowledge and power, but also the incommensurable difference between the oral and written cultures, and on a broader level, it stands also to testify to the smudged borders between formats, technologies and infrastructures of knowledge on the one hand, and the contents, subjectivities and practices they sustain. Despite the fact that Ukawsaw Gronniosaw could not read the book, his desire to enter into conversation with it demonstrates an incredibly profound and accurate understanding of what reading is all about, a conversation with distant people about subjects that merit to travel far.

What is also peculiar about the Talking Book, or more accurately, the Non-Talking Book, is that this very same episode is also narrated, with minor variations, by a number of other Afro-American or Afro-British authors, such as John Marrant (1785), Quobna Ottobah Cugoano (1787), Olaudah Equiano (1789), and John Jea (c. 1815) who recounted their experience of slavery. In a foundational text of 1988 titled The Signifying Monkey, literary critic Henry Louis Gates Jr. suggested that the practice of borrowing scenes and images from each other’s text and incorporating them in new narratives should be understood as a specific literary skill of black vernaculars, which often play with the dissonances between the figurative and denotative meaning of expression. In other words, the reappearance of the Talking Book in various autobiographies of former slaves constitutes a different form of quotation from the one adopted in western academic canon of bibliographic referencing.
Gilles Deleuze commented, in order to paint something new, the painter does not start from a blank canvas, but she has to find the free areas that are left unmarked by all the previous images, virtual or actual, who came before\(^2\). However, here the task is less to find the blank spaces between what is already filled in, but to find ways of reactivating a given repertoire to match the expressive potential of the present situation. In bypassing the fixation with origins and originality, the vernaculars analyzed by Gates refuse to translate the incommensurability of mutual ‘influences’ into a regime of property of ideas, in favour of a proliferation of powerful stories that needed to be heard and shared, to have many authors so as not to have any and nourish the repertoire of a common memory.

In the same spirit, my first encounter with the Talking Book trope was also one of generative misunderstanding. It was mentioned briefly within a book on radical history methodologies titled *All Knees and Elbows of Susceptibility and Refusal: Reading History From Below* that I was using at the time as a tool for thinking through a different set of preoccupations. Despite not paying much deliberate attention to that particular story at the time, its kernel image somehow kept hunting me, simmering in the peripheries of consciousness, gently connecting itself to other fragments of meanings, until my memory morphed it somehow into a never-existent Talking Back at Books episode, where as I (wrongly) recalled it, Gronniosaw would, after obtaining no answer from the book, proceed to ‘talk back’ at it, throwing some impertinent or insolent reply right back at that inert, dumb object of the master, rather than introjecting its lack of response as a confirmation of his inferiority.

In my imagination, Gronniosaw would be whispering to the book some important questions about his life or the fate of his loved ones. He would be try to articulate the questions respectfully, beautifully, to convey his eagerness to learn a way out, to improve himself, to find any kind of redeeming meaning to quench the nonsense that is structural violence. Perhaps he asked advises on weather to nourish his desire to be dead or his desire to kill the masters. And I could (only) imagine the feeling of loss, embarrassment, shame and self-hatred he must have felt when the book refused to talk to him, to deliver any answer, to produce an alternative story of redemption, revenge or escape for him. To give any sense of believable hope to which one could grow an attachment, a sense of meaning where to feel at home. The secret that all those with power seem to be in on, those whose life prepared to feel entitled to meaning and purpose in life, remained in the book, and this silence must have felt like a punch in the face. What an awful, intolerable finale for such a powerful courageous act of transgression. And so, my imagination smudged the final lines as written in memory, and conjured up the image of Gronniosaw cursing the book back, and telling it to, frankly, fuck off.

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I am not an historian and I do not know how (im)plausible this reaction could have been for the subjectivity of an 18th century slave, however I believe that my misunderstanding was generated by a specific process of taking sides. Anthropologist Franco La Cecla dedicated a study to the art of intentional misunderstanding as one of the secret ingredients for the encounter among different populations and cultural traditions⁴. He proposed misunderstandings as a specific art of misinterpreting and false associations that allow for a primary encounter to take place instead of fear, hate or mutual expulsion. In the absence of a common language and away from sanitized and innocuous versions of multiculturalism, misunderstandings allow us to start meeting the other by modifying our own thresholds to include the possibility of a difference, even when the actual meaning of that difference is still vague and opaque, difficult to read or simply not there. What misunderstanding make possible is an encounter with the experience of others that is not resting upon the false pretense of endless communicability and immediate translatability. This does not amount to a glorification of ignorance and stereotyping. To the contrary, misunderstanding is a necessary phase or process in getting to know something or someone new, and of incorporating their meaning into our own without preemptively superimposing one’s own interpretative frameworks and meanings onto them. Misunderstanding is an art and an acquired taste for pushing through failure, for becoming undone, and for felling a bit silly and falling short. It invites the practice of self-irony and looking the other way, pretending not to notice, what might go wrong. In exchange for all the awkwardness, which is the inevitable price to pay for all true encounters with other beings, from sex to meeting your friends’ babies for the first time, misunderstandings gift us with the rare opportunity to let intentions matter more than performances. Meaning that knowledge involves the production of solidarity, a taking of sides.

In the end, the misunderstanding in which I got caught circuitously brought me back to realign with Gronniosaw’s act, finally understanding that he did, in fact, talk back to the book by the very act of writing his own autobiography in which his life, the life of a former slave, was going to be recorded for future generations and testify to the capacity of learning as the act of freedom, and in which the master’s book would be silent for ever. This is not to suggest in any way that I wish to romanticize the experience of Gronniosaw or trivialize the history of rebellion against slavery, which should actually be called a revolution, and which was not allowed to take place in the messy practice of misunderstanding, but had to be spelled out in war. As Harney and Moten say, to survive the coming genocide⁵, we better learn from those who had to survive a genocide. Thus one step in this direction might as well be debunk the myths currently providing the bases for the contemporary necrophilic, asphyctic, genocidal “cultural” practices of today.

When Ukawsaw Gronniosaw the slave picked up a book thinking that he might strike a conversation with it, his misunderstanding was in fact not so far

from the truth. Indeed, reading was for a long time understood as a dialogic activity with an absent interlocutor and/or as a collective practice of interpretation. As Alberto Manguel reconstructed in his book on the History of Reading, during antiquity the engagement with book was primarily a bodily one. Reading was an aural experience: words were by default recited with one’s lips, performatively, aloud, or in a murmur if one was in library – which would have been a buzzy place, vibrant with the cacophony of hundreds of different simultaneous conversations, rather than a perfectly silent one. Beyond a dialogue with an absent interlocutor, reading was moreover an occasion of conversation with one’s immediate circles, it was a way of engineering new kinds of communities of interest, different from the communities of proximity which would have constituted the predominant social landscape. Imagine a world in which reading could be heard by others, family members, friends, colleagues, who could stop by to eavesdrop and occasionally decide to interrupt the reader to on the story being told, to ask questions or express opinions, thus generating further opportunities for discussion and collective elaboration of ideas. Apparently it is only in the 5th century that silent reading in public becomes established as an acceptable conduct, or at least the first historical sources place the phenomenon at this time. The first author to speak about this is Augustine, who wrote in his Confessions that Ambrose, bishop of Milan, developed this stupefying habit of reading silently to avoid being interrupted by the other monks. What was gained in this passage is surely a greater freedom of thought, the possibility to engage in speculative and imaginative musings without being immediately subjected to collective scrutiny (and censorship). However, this new faculty also represents the abandonment of another possible way of conceiving of autonomous learning as a form of freedom that takes care of the circulation of ideas and stories. As the link between reading and conversations becomes looser, the corollary buzzing nebula of side commentary, misunderstandings, divergent opinions and reciprocal convincing that grounds ideas in the relationships with the others who contribute to a conversation begins to fade as well. In its place, we have the fragmentation of knowledge operated by didactics, that is, paraphrasing Ivan Illich, the ideology according to which all that is worth knowing has to be taught in order to be known.

**Grammar for knowing less**

In a series of articles on pedagogy from the early 1980s, Ivan Illich excavated another historical fact which forever changed the practice of collective thought in the modern world, as he maps the invention of grammar books for living languages as the precursors of the ongoing infantilization of society via the ubiquitous spread of didactic methods of control. Illich undelined how the first modern grammar ever compiled, the Castillian grammar put together in 1942 by Antonio de Nebrija, was financed by the Spanish crown in the person of Queen Isabella at the very same time while she is sponsoring Columbus’ voyage to the Indies via an alternative route. Both projects concur to a new conception of sovereignty with the ambition of growing enormously not only in its extension, but also in the intensity of its power.

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What Illich notes as significant was the letter of request for funding that Nebrija sent to the queen, and the argumentation he presented to convince her of the importance of his project. At the time, the only languages for which grammar books had been compiled were dead ones, Latin and Greek. The idea that living language, ever evolving in countless local variations, could be systematized seemed odd. People learned how to speak form their communities, and the monarchy did not even imagine that the teaching of language could be part of sovereign governance. The idea must have seed so odd the monarch rejected it at first. But Nebrija persisted with a seductive argumentation: the new grammar will serve the sovereign power because it will help prevent the proliferation of vernacular printed books that was an emergent cause of concern for instituted powers at the time. The printing press had been invented a few decades prior, and by 1942 many books were being printed in vernacular languages and circulated autonomously. What kind of books were people writing and reading? Illich let us know that the most popular genres at this time were how-to manuals and self-help books on a variety of topics, from acquiring the skill of calligraphy to knowing how to die well. What people were doing with the new technology of books was, in other words, to learn without teachers, expressing a desire for autonomous study without the hierarchies of sanctioned authoritative knowledge. The same desire that, one could argue, propelled the first spread of the written word as an apparatus that supported and amplified the opportunities for conversation, both with absent, far away partners, and with immediate circles of acquaintances.

The impact of Nebrija’s operation was destined to impact the world with a force comparable with Columbus’ first voyage across the Atlantic, and the coincidence that the grammatization of language and the colonial process begun in the same year is saturated with symbolic meanings. Both projects were expeditions in foreign territories and opened the way for a new kind of imperial power, enabling it to become incommensurably more extended geographically, but also capable to reach much deeper within people’s subjectivities.

Illich’s meticulous account of Nebrija’s project actually serve this author as a setting of the stage for the coming of John Amos Comenius, around one and a half century later, who was the first scholar to advocate for universal didactics, or the opportunity for experts to teach people everything according to specific methods. Illich was a vocal opposition to this idea, warning of the dangerous effects of a didactic society that actually would erode the art of autonomous knowledge production. His proposition is not however a populist embracing of the supposed wisdom of ignorance and superstition; nor it is advocating for the banality of common sense understood as a collation of cliché ideas and hearsay believes. Instead, in gesturing to wards a shift of emphasis from teaching to learning lies the

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opportunity to realize that “all knowledge”, to say it with Peter McLaren, “is forged in histories that are played out in the field of social antagonisms.”

What Illich passionately warned against with his theory of deschooling was that at times educational establishments protect and encourage learning as a capacity to be more and other from what we already are, but other times they do exactly the opposite, keeping learning at bay, literally, not allowing it to sail off. That is why it is important to explore the conditions in which learning can happen.

An art without name

Writing in 1994, at a moment that witnessed the adoption of computers in pedagogical context, educator Seymour Papert wrote:

Why is there no world in English for the art of learning? Webster says that the word pedagogy means the art of teaching. What is missing is a parallel word for learning. In schools of education, courses on the art of teaching are often listed simply as ‘methods’. Everyone understands that the methods of importance in education are those of teaching – these courses supply what is thought to be needed to become a skilled teacher. Want what about methods of learning? What courses are offered for those who want to become skilled learners?

It is this art of learning that is threatened by a didactic grammatization of life. It is an art that can persist only by whipping itself up in a state of having to be reinvented constantly. As artist Larraitz Torres told me in conversation, learning is an art that has no interest in being accepted as such, and yet it calls forth platforms where it can be accepted as such; it is an art that has no name and yet it invents the names that can resist the indexical nomenclature of power, allowing us to make sense of experience otherwise.

Back in the 1970s the Black Panthers Party asked all of their members to read for two hours every day. The underlying understanding was that members had to “keep abreast of the political situation”, familiarising themselves with the fundamentals of Marxist and postcolonial critique. Yet, the emphasis of the invitation was to read, for at least two hours, everyday. The Panthers are more famous today for being the first social justice movement that has legitimized the use of weapons for self-defence (against

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10 By ‘educational establishment’ I do not mean simply physical places like schools and universities, but also the corollary diffused procedures that organize activities associated with knowledge acquisition.


racist and police brutality). Alongside this, they also organized medical aid centres and free breakfast programmes for children in all their branches. The simultaneous necessity of courage and tenderness is key to understand the Panthers' political experience, as they understood that one without the other would have been an impotent political choice in the face of the dominant violence. Reading for two hours a day was the hinge able to keep together these two wildly different modes of action, the defence and the care. They gave the art of learning a corner of respite, for legitimately existing as a social practice. What intellectual, material and affective means could we dedicate to the art of learning today?

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