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Double quote unquote: Scholarly attribution as (a) speculative play in the Remix Academy

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Abstract
Many years ago, while studying in Paris as a novice postgraduate, I was invited to accompany a friend to a seminar with Jacques Derrida. I leapt at the chance even though I was only just learning French. Although I tried hard to follow the discussion, the extent of my participation was probably signing the attendance sheet. Afterwards, caught up on the edges of a small crowd of acolytes in the foyer as we waited out a sudden rainstorm, Derrida turned to me and charmingly complimented me on my forethought in predicting rain, pointing to my umbrella. Flustered, I garbled something in broken French about how I never forgot my umbrella, how desolated I was that he had mislaid his, and would he perhaps desire mine? After a small silence, where he and the other students side-eyed me warily, he declined. For years I dined on this story of meeting a celebrity academic, cheerfully re-enacting my linguistic ineptitude.

Keywords
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Abstract

Many years ago, while studying in Paris as a novice postgraduate, I was invited to accompany a friend to a seminar with Jacques Derrida. I left at the chance even though I was only just learning French. Although I tried hard to follow the discussion, the extent of my participation was probably signing the attendance sheet. Afterwards, caught up on the edges of a small crowd of acolytes in the foyer as we waited out a sudden rainstorm, Derrida turned to me and charmingly complimented me on my forththought in predicting rain, pointing to my umbrella. Flustered, I garbled something in broken French about how I never forget my umbrella, how desolated I was that he had mislaid his, and would he perhaps desire mine? After a small silence, where he and the other students side-eyed me warily, he declined. For years I dined on this story of meeting a celebrity academic, cheerfully re-enacting my linguistic ineptitude.

Nearly a decade later I was taken aback when I overheard a lecturer in philosophy at the University of Sydney re-telling my encounter as a witty anecdote, where an early career academic teased Derrida with a masterful quip, quoting back to him his own attention to someone else's quote. It turned out that Spure, one of Derrida's more obscure early essays, employs an extended riff on an inexplicable citation found in inverted commas in the margins of Nietzsche's papers: "J'ai oublié mon parapluie" ("I have forgotten my umbrella"). My clumsy response to a polite enquiry was recast in a process of Chinese whispers in my academic community as a snappy spur-of-the-moment witicism. This re-telling didn't just selectively edit my encounter, but remixed it with a meta-narrative that I had myself referenced, albeit unknowingly. My ongoing interest in the more playful breaches of scholarly conventions of quotation and attribution can be traced back to this incident, where my own presentation of an academic self was appropriated and remixed from fumbler to quipster. I've also been struck throughout my teaching career by the seeming disconnect between the stringent academic rules for referencing and citation of appropriation that are inherent to popular remix culture. I'm taking the opportunity in this paper to reflect on the practice of scholarly quotation itself, before examining some recent creative provocations to the academic 'author' situated inventively at the crossroad between scholarly convention and remix culture.

Early in his own teaching career at Oxford University Lewis Carroll, wrote to his younger siblings describing the importance of maintaining his dignity as a new tutor. He outlines the distance his college was at pains to maintain between teachers and their students: "otherwise, you know, they are not humble enough". Carroll playfully describes the set-up of a tutor sitting at his desk, behind closed doors and without access to today's communication technologies, relying on a series of college 'scouts' to convey information down corridors and staircases to the confused student waiting for instruction below. The lectures, according to Carroll, went playfully at the crossroad between scholarly convention and remix culture.

I've also been struck throughout my teaching career by the seeming disconnect between the stringent academic rules for referencing and citation of appropriation that are inherent to popular remix culture. I'm taking the opportunity in this paper to reflect on the practice of scholarly quotation itself, before examining some recent creative provocations to the academic 'author' situated inventively at the crossroad between scholarly convention and remix culture.

Abstract

In a similar vein Cheré Harden Blair has used remix as a theoretical framework to grapple with the issue of plagiarism in the postmodern classroom. If, following Roland Barthes, all writing is "a tissue of quotations drawn from innumerable centers of culture" (146), and if all writing is therefore rewriting, then punishing...
students for plagiarism becomes problematic. Blair argues that since scholarly writing has become a mosaic of digital and textual productions, then teaching must follow suit, especially since teaching, as a dynamic, shifting and intertextual enterprise, is more suited to the digital revolution than traditional, fixed writing (175). She argues that teachers provide a space in which students for the first time ‘own’ the knowledge they have learned and feel a sense of ownership and identity. Teachers can make copying and plagiarism into a positive process and by doing so they can make students more responsible and accountable for their work. Teachers should develop a program of ‘uncreative writing’ at the University of Pennsylvania, where, among other plagiaristic tasks, they are expected to transcribe whole passages from books, download essays from online paper mills and defend them as their own. Moreover, marking essays students who show a ‘lack of originality’. In his own writing and performances, which depend almost exclusively on strategies of appropriation, plagiarism and recontextualisation of often banal sources like traffic reports, Goldsmith says that he is working to de-familiarise normative structures of language. For Goldsmith, reframing language into other contexts and situations makes it possible to see the familiar in a new light. He explains his process halfway through the print book: 

"creative risk management" where the artist, also a scholar and a teacher, is "willing to drop all intellectual pretence and turn his theoretical agenda into (a) speculative play" (x). He explains his process halfway through the print book:

Other times we who create innovative works of remix art are fully self-conscious of the ritual lineage we spring forth from and knowingly take on other remixological styles just to see what happens when we move inside other writers' bodies (of work)

This is when remixologically inhabiting the spirit of another writer’s stylistic tendencies or at least the subconsciously imagined writers’ gestures that illuminate his or her live spontaneous performance feels more like an embodied praxis

In some ways this all seems so obvious to me: I mean what is a writer anyway but a simultaneous and continuous fusion of remixologically inhabited bodies of work? (109)

Amerika mashes up the jargon of academic writing with avant-pop forms of digital rhetoric in order to "move inside other writer's bodies of work" in order to test out his theoretical agenda in an "embodied praxis" at the same time that he shakes up the way that contemporary scholarship itself is performed.

The remixthebook project inevitably recalls one of the great early-twentieth century plays with scholarly quotation, Walter Benjamin's The Arcades Project. Instead of avoiding conventional quoting, footnoting and referencing, these are the very fabric of Benjamin's sprawling project, composed entirely of quotes drawn from nineteenth century philosophy and literature. This early scholarly 'remixing' project has been described as bewildering and oppressive, but which others still find relevant and inspirational. Marjorie Perloff, for instance, finds the 'passages' in Benjamin’s Arcades have "become the digital passages we take through websites and YouTube videos, navigating our way from one Google link to another and over the bridges provided by our favourite search engines and web pages" (49).

For Benjamin, the process of collecting quotes was addictive. Hannah Arendt describes his habit of carrying little black notebooks in which “he tirelessly entered in the way of ‘pearls’ and ‘coral’. On occasion he read from them aloud, showed them around like items of curiosity, and told his friends to take them away with them when they left.” (49).

http://journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/rt/printerFreid...
Denton: So, you’ve been doing this for three years??
Freakley: Yes, Optus 1991
Denton: How do people respond to you speaking in such an unnatural way?

Video documentation of Freakley’s encounters with unsuspecting members of the public reveal how frustrating the inclusion of ‘spoken’ references can be, let alone how taken aback people are on realising they never get Freakley’s own words, but are instead receiving layers of quotations. The frustration can quickly turn hostile (Denton at one point tells Freakley to “shut up”) or prove contagious, as people attempt to match or one-up her quotes (see Cook’s interview 8). Apparently, when Freakley continued her commitment to the performance at a Perth Centerlink, the staff sent her to a psychiatrist and she was diagnosed with an obsessive-compulsive disorder, then prescribed medication (Schwartzkoff 4).

While Benjamin’s The Arcades Project invites the reader to scroll through its pages as a kind of textual flaneur, Freakley herself becomes a walking and talking word processor, extending the possibilities of America’s “embodied praxis” in an inescapable remix of other people’s words and phrases. At the beginning of the project, Freakley organised a card collection of quotes categorised into possible conversation topics, and devised a ‘harness’ for easy access.

Danielle Freakley’s Image: Danielle Freakley’s The Quote Generator harness

Eventually, however, Freakley was able to rely on her own memory of an astounding number of quotations, becoming a “near mechanical vessel” (Gottlieb 2009), or, according to her own manifesto, a “regurgitation library to live by”:

The Quote Generator reads, and researches as it speaks. The Quote Generator is both the reader and composer/editor. The Quote Generator is not an actor spouting lines on a stage. The Quote Generator assimilates others lines into everyday social life … The Quote Generator, tries to find its own voice, an understanding through throbbing collations of others, constantly glutonously referencing. Much academic writing quotes/references ravenously. New things cannot be said without constant referral, acknowledgement to what has been already, the intricate detective work in the barking of the academic dog.

By her unrelenting appropriation and regurgitating of quotations, Freakley uses sampling as a technique for an extended performance that draws attention to the remixology of everyday life. By replacing conversation with a hyper-insistence on quotes and their simultaneous citation, she draws attention to the artificiality and inescapability of the ‘codes’ that make up not just ordinary conversations, but also conventional academic discourse, what she calls the “barking of the academic dog”.

Freakley’s performance has pushed the scholarly conventions of quoting and referencing to their furthest extreme, in what has been described by Daine Singer as a kind of “endurance art” that relies, in large part, on an antagonistic relationship to its audience. In his now legendary 1969 “Double Session” seminar, Derrida, too, experimented with the pedagogical performance of the (re)producing author, teasing his earned academic audience. It is reported that the seminar began in a dimly lit room lined with blackboards covered with quotations that Derrida, for a while, simply “pointed to in silence” (177). In this seminar, Derrida put into play notions that can be understood to inform remix practices just as much as they do deconstruction: the author, originality, mimesis, imitation, representation and reference. Scholarly conventions, perhaps particularly the quotation practices that insist on the circulation of rigid codes of attribution, and are defended by increasingly out-of-date understandings of contemporary research, writing and teaching practices, are ripe to be played with. Remix offers an expanded discursive framework to do this in creative and entertaining ways.

References

