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in the margins

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Abstract

A margin is defined relative to something else. A ruled line. A body of text on a page. The margins are the *excess*, outside of the value we can qualify or quantify. Our understandings of the habitability of the margins are too often framed as fundamental differences between those that inhabit value and the rest that do not. What would happen if we reframed the margins beyond a simple dichotomy? What could we gain if the margins were a habitable space around and between the things we prioritize in defining? By analyzing a body of my own art, I visualize the margins through the categories of marginalia and color(ism). In marginalia, I emphasize the coordination between linguistic structures on the page as a way to project the margins into habitable space. Through an analysis of color(ism), I show that the margins are neither for blackness nor whiteness. It is color *on the brink*. The *brink* – an edge between two things that is only known through a spatial, epistemological, and ontological understanding of something because it neither one or the other. This emphasis on color is meant to draw a line from the semantic page to the aesthetic space through affect. Ultimately the goal of this paper is not just to theoretically propose such a space, but to also apply it as a form of embodied knowledge that I have/am living, and how such a space as the margins can be seen in traces through creative expression.
margin:

a. *Noun.* The edge or border of something.

— *Oxford English Dictionary*

A margin is defined relative to something else. A ruled line. A number or standard. A country. A body of text on a page. It is something that only gains its ontological value via its valueless-ness in comparison to something else. The margins are the *excess*, outside of the value we can qualify or quantify. In her seminal work *In the Wake*, Sharpe uses the literal and metaphorical implications of the *wake* as a space to understand how Black being is still lived with
and through the legacy of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade and African diaspora (Sharpe 24). The
“wake” is a space created through the actions of another force – a larger object that cuts through
everything else leaves a wake. A ship on the water. The space in the recoil of a gun. In other
words, Sharpe shows Black being/non-being is lived in a fraught space of continuous pressure –
in *the wake* (Sharpe). Like Sharpe, I want to locate another form of being that is formed in
response to its irreconcilability: the margins. We are used to *being in the margins*; a description of
the impoverished or the overlooked. But our understandings of the habitability of the margins
are too often framed as fundamental differences between those that inhabit value and the rest
that do not. What would happen if we reframed the margins beyond a simple dichotomy? What
could we gain if the margins were a habitable space around and between the things we prioritize
in defining? A space of erasure, where people from more defined or accepted spaces are moved
to, i.e. moved *into the margins* when they become too difficult to understand. A space I argue,
where identities not easily reconciled with are placed, and therefore pose a new methodology of
how to value.

In the following pages, I will use a body of art to visualize the margins and show it as a
method of revalue. Through the categories of marginalia and color(ism), I will emphasize various
linguistic structures as the main propagator of the margins as a space, both in the way it acts as a
hold (a la Sharpe (Sharpe 132)) for the things we have no other place for, and as a way to sharply
define where the comfortable ends for us and the uncomfortable begins. The margins are not
simply otherizing; they are the place where our discomfort comes not from their inability to be
easily recognized, pin-down, and defined. The margins are queer.

Unlike with Sharpe’s work, which can point to the concreteness and fleshiness of what
Black being has meant historically and continues to mean, it is more difficult (not *impossible* – it
could still be done) to map out where and how the margins exists historically because of its continuous erasure as a non-space. It is a different type of knowledge, neither for blackness nor whiteness. It is color on the brink. The brink – an edge between two things that is only known through a spatial, epistemological, and ontological understanding of something as neither one nor the other. It is an indiscernible queerness, an impalpable brown. This emphasis on color is meant to draw a line from the semantic page to the aesthetic space through affect – with art as the primary strategy of where world-making can occur when the margins are pictured. The use of aesthetics as central to enabling world-making has been used by José Esteban Muñoz in *Cruising Utopia* (2009), where he analyzes performance art, painting, poetry, dance, etc., as important components that give a type of queer aesthetics. Most importantly, Muñoz uses these aesthetics to access the creation and expression of queer utopias – moments of escape in the rejection of systems of heteropatriarchy and capital – moments of hope (Muñoz 12). Like Muñoz, I believe all the theory I lay out would not survive without the pairing with art – as it is the art that allows the glimpses and traces of what the margins actually is, making it both recognizable and called into being. Without our efforts to visualize and call to spaces like the margins, their existence as a non-specific non-space will continue, acting as a continually expanding chamber, where knowledge that makes us uncomfortable in its own stickiness or indescribability, is moved to.

By emphasizing the margins as a space used in my own art practice, I work to show the formidability of such a tool and how it can concretely be used to map out the lives and experiences of individuals. Like Sharpe, who uses personal experience to give examples of *wake work* and give space to affective components of what Black being means in, say, the racist contexts of contemporary America (Sharpe 69), I also want to highlight affective moments of
when I believe the margins is negotiated. Ultimately the goal of this thesis is not just to
theoretically propose such a space, but to also apply it as a form of embodied knowledge that I
have/am living, questioning how such a space can be seen in traces through creative expression.
Noam Chomsky's 'Knowledge of Language', Pages 2 and 3

Savannah Bustillo
Citrasolv transfer and pronto plate
16.5 x 19 inches
2017
Noam Chomsky's 'Knowledge of Language', Pages 4 and 5
Savannah Bustillo
Citrasolv transfer and pronto plate
16.5 x 19 inches
2017
Noam Chomsky’s 'Knowledge of Language', Pages 6 and 7

Savannah Bustillo
Citasolv transfer and pronto plate
16.5 x 19 inches
2017
Noam Chomsky’s *Knowledge of Language*, Pages 8 and 9

Savannah Bustillo

Citasolv transfer and pronto plate

16.5 x 19 inches

2017
I started this piece with a definition of the margins. A definition: a simple semantic device that tethers the page to the spaces beyond it. It is through the use and metaphor of the semantic that categories of space are expanded and brought into being. Lauren Berlant, for example, highlights how the expansion of temporal moments can create potential in her concept of “cruel optimism” – the affective behavior of individuals in making a lifestyle – the good life (Berlant 3). Specifically, important linguistic components marked in text are ways of accessing this potential – the ellipsis, the “um” in text that is not doctored, the comma or pause; these all are semantic indications of temporal stretching that for a moment carries a potential in relation to the creation of a new space (Berlant 34). Povinelli speaks of the bracket and bracketing as a way of creating a space to understand the slow death that comes from individuals who are marginalized and being worn down and out against the structures of late liberalism (Povinelli 77). Reddy talks about the concept of the amendment – both as a semantic qualifier and as change in legal situations that ultimately create a space to allow the violence against queer people of color (Reddy 13). Even Sharpe understands the wake as a resistance and disruption to the violent annotations and redactions that occur on the Black body (Sharpe 212). All of these scholars show a key link between the actualization of space and the semantic or linguistic element. Thus, in discussing marginalia we are not strictly limited to lay flat against the immediate white page, but to fall into the white page as an engulfing and enveloping spatial quality – what Sharpe aptly calls the “weather” of whiteness (Sharpe 193). While perhaps the most obvious link from the semantic to actual space can maybe best be illustrated via the concept of marginalia, my larger goal here is to bring into coordination linguistic praxis with visual forms and spaces.
With marginalia, the movement of text from the demarcated space on the page into the margins begins to push not just the legitimacy of who captures the attention of the viewer, but creates a larger conversation of multiple voices; disrupting the flow, knowledge is no longer delivered passively from author to reader. In the pieces Noam Chomsky’s ‘Knowledge of Language’, Pages 1 through 9, a vibrant conversation occurs between Noam Chomsky and myself, through the printing of my own hand annotations in various colors of red ink on top of Chomsky’s essay “Knowledge of Language.” While in the first printed layer of red annotations I respond to Chomsky, in the second layer I respond to previous printed annotations, and by the third layer again I respond to the second layer of comments. The cyclical expansion of my own voice responding to myself, looming larger than the spread of the original essay and the articulations of a canonized Chomsky, offer a window into how marginalia begins mapping out a space. It is in conceptually privileging the artist’s voice – my personal voice – that there is simultaneously an expansion into the public and private identities associated with those voices that are also put in contention. Factors of my identity – queer, Latina, woman – all create the tension in the piece of what exactly has allowed someone with my identity to surpass an academic, heterosexual, white male. In this way, the piece is gesturing not just to the bodies of myself and Chomsky, but the embodied practices of speech that each are purvey to. The two pages of text and their annotations work as a set of lungs, both being utilized at the same moment by two different bodies – two voices. Such tension of precisely these two voices is what gives a view of the margins – where the “weather” of whiteness (Sharpe 193) is being pushed and prodded by some Other who is difficult to define.
Marginalia and forms of graffiti or defacement more broadly operate under a reclaiming of space, where the book and the city are both metaphorical bodies. In the piece *Mexico, One Plate at a Time*, the distance of travel and expansion around locales and the book as both body and documenter of bodies are analyzed. In this piece, a viewer can turn through pages of handmade oregano paper to look at “traditional” Mexican recipes hand printed with ingredients and preparation instructions from the cookbook by Rick Bayless – so called the Julia Child of Mexican food for Americans (Amazon.com 2018). However, as pages fold out from a single...
recipe, the viewer will see the tracing of the ingredients from their original locales in Mexico or other parts of Latin America and their journey back to Europe through the expeditions of Christopher Columbus.

The preparation instructions also bear these temporal shifts, as each fold out page has printed the same instructions repeated, but with each step the ingredients being prepared are substituted for the people of the locales each ingredient passes through on the way to Europe. For example “Cut and slice the tomatoes and fry them in the pan” becomes “Cut and slice the Mexicans and fry them in the pan” becomes “Cut and slice the Caribbean people and fry them in the pan” becomes “Cut and slice the Spanish and fry them in the pan” – ending with the permutation that takes the reader back to Europe. The bridging of bodies to the violent actions of colonization, cultural imperialism, and erasure all come together in the changing instructions on how to prepare “traditional” Mexican cuisine. The *marginalia* that is fighting the conceptual boundaries of the codified knowledge – here the language of a white American heterosexual male – is precisely my substitutions. Marginalia gains another meaning as the conceptual “borders” of Bayless’ language is transgressed, just like the borders of Chomsky’s body of text, just as *borders* more generally can be conceptually placed here as lines bodies cross to make meaning. The margins is a space for the border-hoppers and border-crossers.
I am the white wall; my brother is not

Savannah Bustillo
Installation
Skin colored paint, frame, mugshot
2018
I am the white wall; my brother is not

Savannah Bustillo
Skin colored paint, frame, mugshot

(Detail) I am the white wall; my brother is not
The margins works as a space not just to be crossed but also held in the “hold” (Sharpe) of a gallery or museum – serving as the marginalia within the whitewashed and clinical space of acceptable expression. I have found a painted gallery to be a good way to plot out my own position in an academic art environment. I have a younger brother who has much darker skin than I do. Often, he is called names; I am not. A piece like *I am the white wall; my brother is not*, is meant to chart these differences not just in how the relationship between my brother and I are seen, but also how our skin colors are pointers to identity within the art world. The space between us can be seen through the boundaries of color that place my white-passing skin tone as an embodied form of the white gallery wall – an embodiment of the white “weather” (Sharpe 135). The small nine by nine-inch frame in the middle of the wall showing his mugshot, name, and date, however, can only be understood with the marginalia that is placed on the wall a few feet away. Here, white vinyl lettering list the title of the piece and then my own name, as artist and sibling to the brown perpetrator in the frame. Here, what would maybe be classified as typical artist label for the “art” is actually also the piece – a key annotation off to the side – conceptually and physically on the wall – that grants a new form of readability by modifying the relationship between the white wall weather, myself, and my brother. Again, like Chomsky and Bayless, now it is my own name that is in tension with the image of my brother and the colors we are both a part of. Working similarly with color is the artist Glen Ligon, who’s two *Untitled* works show situations of feeling most or least colored within the gallery space (The Whitney Museum of American Art). I interpret Ligon here, as I too want to show, how the gallery works through bodies of color, placing them in situations where color is a key mediation.

Together, these pieces highlight the flexibility of the category of marginalia in refiguring not just the knowledge generated on a page, but also its projection into space. The margins can
be glimpsed here as the place where marginalia takes us, as it circles out and around the set areas we understand.

Untitled (I Feel Most Colored When I Am Thrown Against a Sharp White Background) and Untitled (I Do Not Always Feel Colored)

Glen Ligon
25 3/16 × 17 7/16 inches
Etching and aquatint
1992
Color(ism)

Dipped and Skinned Husks
Savannah Bustillo
Corn husks, skin colored paint
24 x 18 inches
2018
Dipped and Skinned Beans and Rice
Savannah Bustillo
Beans, rice, tortilla, skin colored paint
24 x 18 inches
2018
Imagine two colors side-by-side, with the edges touching. These edges begin to melt and vibrate as our eye works optically to situate them in relation to each other. Regardless of the illusion, we still have two separate colors that retain the same hue and value before they were placed together. We are caught. Stuck between an epistemological truth and an acquisitioned truth. This is the nature of the margins, where color provides an affect of the brink – where mixed color becomes more indiscernible. In both *Dipped and Skinned Husks* and *Dipped and Skinned Beans and Rice*, white flesh and brown flesh coalesce around an organic line of the margins, caught in between color and food. The food is an affect – gnarled and dried husks of skin, a vomitus pile of beans and rice – both highlighting responses of the body and an embodied response around the lines of color. Food is coated in color, seen by the viewer to trigger affective bodily responses while also acting as referents to embodied responses. However, food is also rendered unconsumable – both as dipped in paint and as metaphor of the performance of food not as sustenance but as spectacle. Preparing and eating a meal are now only framed around who can rightfully claim to do so, under a color field. The margins here is at the center of all of this, where the impalpable brown is created at the line the two main colors meet – the only space that through its indiscernibility, food exists as non-spectacle. Like the piece *My Calling (Card) #1* by the conceptual artist Adrian Piper, the indiscernibility of color is what causes ruptures in the gallery space and beyond (Yale University Art Gallery). Here, Piper creates a performance by handing out her card every time someone makes a racist comment. This card alerts the commenters of her status as a black woman, despite her white-passing skin tone. In this way, Piper calls people to account for their actions through a play on colors indiscernibility and stickiness.
Dear Friend,

I am black.

I am sure you did not realize this when you made/laughed at/agreed with that racist remark. In the past, I have attempted to alert white people to my racial identity in advance. Unfortunately, this invariably causes them to react to me as pushy, manipulative, or socially inappropriate. Therefore, my policy is to assume that white people do not make these remarks, even when they believe there are no black people present, and to distribute this card when they do.

I regret any discomfort my presence is causing you, just as I am sure you regret the discomfort your racism is causing me.

*My Calling (Card) #1*
Adrian Piper
Offset lithograph
2 x 3 1/2 inches
1986
Every day I eat until I am full
Savannah Bustillo
One bag of tortillas, pronto plate
Artist book, edition of 5, 7 x 7 ½ inches
2018
The spectacle of consumption and preparation of food can also be projected into different temporalities. I am a white-passing person of color – the whitest person in my family. I am mixed race. People assume this means mainly white and a dot of brown when it is, in fact, the opposite. For me, the margins are in resituating myself in a space where I can revalue my own position within the spectrum of color. In *Every day I eat until I am full*, thirty-six hand printed pages of one bag of corn tortillas, each one bearing the statement “I thought you were just another white girl.” Each tortilla becomes increasingly browner, beginning with a “white” skin tone and ending with a dark brown. Here the margins lay in the shift, within each page as a color spectrum from white to brown is presented, there is no place for the viewer to identify where the transition from white to brown is metaphorically as a projection of skin tone or race. Between neighboring pages, it is impossible to identify a change is even occurring. The margins show that the gradients of identity are disconnected from the affective textures of skin and color, always in flux, always changing.

I began with a definition of margin that we are familiar with to try and connect its abstract qualities with the grounded material specificities of the page. From there, other aesthetics beyond the whiteness of the page and into whiteness as a textured space expand the margins into a space of habitability and revaluing that is within whiteness but also distinct in its ability to remain indefinable. The margins have, through the pairing with different art above, given a texture and materiality to the margins that allow its spatialization beyond the plane of the page, beyond the hold of the gallery, beyond the spectacle and voyeurism of its adherents, and into modes of temporality and action. Therefore, I want to end with a new Margins – one that can give a habitability and value to the indefinable:
Margins:

a. *Noun.* An enduring moment that can be habitable, and takes up space, even if this space has difficulty being defined; where people taken from more defined or accepted spaces are moved to in order to re-find value
Works Cited


Yale University Art Gallery. “My Calling (Card) #1.” Yale University Art Gallery, 2016, artgallery.yale.edu/collections/objects/218575.
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Mexico, One Plate at a Time, Savannah Bustillo, 10 x 13 x 1/2 inches, Artist book with handmade cotton paper with oregano, book board, and thread, 2017

I am the white wall; my brother is not, Savannah Bustillo, Installation, Skin colored paint, frame, mugshot, 2018

(Detail) I am the white wall; my brother is not, Savannah Bustillo, Installation, Skin colored paint, frame, mugshot, 2018

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