

EDITORIAL: ON MARGINALITIES

by

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I have been working on the edges and in the margins for years. What I mean is that I have spent a great deal of my academic career studying, teaching, and writing about African American literature. Learning to see from my own society's margins has made me more aware of America's central values and how those on the margin can renew the America's revolutionary spiritual striving for freedom, equality, and justice. Several of the papers in this issue of *Echoes* explore this phenomenon. Another essay on language touches on a different kind of marginality, one that I have experienced personally as I have lived and worked in Sierra Leone, Japan, and most recently Greece. Being invited to write an introduction to this issue of *Echoes* gave me the opportunity to reflect again on this strange phenomenon of marginality with the help of a fascinating set of student contributions. The process has reaffirmed my belief that language and literature can be profoundly transformative.

One first thinks of marginality as a subjectification imposed by others. In the historical case of African Americans, being made the subject has created the odd sensation of feeling homeless in one's homeland. It has also proven to be liberating. When writers represent characters locked out of the social, political, and economic institutions and processes, the reader can transform this sense of exile-at-home into a self-conscious perspective from which to view the social and cultural center objectively. In learning to see this way, one can find agency, the power to change position and expand the center itself. Looking at America's center, its core ideals, from the margin can be self- and nation-renewing. What clearer view can there be of those central ideals of freedom and equality than that of someone who values yet is denied them. What better way to stir America to establish justice for all, as its constitution asserts it must, than to measure marginal experience against core values. Doing so reminds all Americans that there is a better nation that we must continue to build, recognizing that revolution is a process not merely a point of historic origin; it is our national journey toward John Winthrop's 1630 vision of America: "[W]ee shall be as a Citty upon a Hill, the eies of all people are uppon us" (225). Until the margin merges with the center in some sort of paradoxical social, political, and economic reality, the revolution must go on. And it is the bustling movement and the hubbub on the margins that will continue to beckon Americans toward a more inclusive society.

So the marginal subject activated by a self-conscious understanding of marginal identity becomes the American patriot moving the revolution for universal human rights forward, however painful. In thinking about this movement from subject to agent, I have learned about marginality's alienation and pain, but I have also learned that it is within the soul of what Robert Park long ago called "the marginal man" that the true melding and merging, the social and cultural alchemy of assimilation into an American identity takes place.

Even before Parks and the Chicago School, W.E.B. DuBois in his 1903 classic *The Souls of Black Folk* articulated the Janus-like character of marginality in formulating his famous definition of "double-consciousness":

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness—an American, A Negro; two warring souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (715)

While DuBois poignantly describes the painful tension of marginality, he also leavens the war within the Negro self with a dynamic sense of striving, a hope: to merge this “double self into a better and truer self.” Calling the dual identity of Negro and American “ideals” creates an opening, a gap between the two terms. What does Negro mean as an ideal? What does American mean as an ideal? Consciously inhabiting this fissure between and on the edges of both identities allows one to find an overlapping humanity in which difference becomes visible and valuable.

Here I would like to introduce “liminal,” a term related to marginal but more dynamic and hopeful. A liminal identity implies one can change social positions. It can free those on the margin from being subjects and transform them into hopeful agents. Changing the marginal to the liminal, I think, was what DuBois tried so hard to do in his life's work. While being liminal still locates one on or in the margin of society, it implies the possibility of moving from one state of being to another, much as an initiate changes when in the process of becoming a fully enfranchised member of a group. As a liminal person, one can see what is central and, through a sometimes painful process, move from the margin to the center. In DuBois's vision, the Negro can embrace a cultural and ethnic identity as well as assume the privileges and prerogatives of an American identity. In many ways the movement in the American lexicon from Negro to African American marks the necessary step from out of the margin and into the center.

Now, I would like to return to this issue of *Echoes* and the student reflections on marginality. Though the pieces collected here take a variety of forms, all testify to the writers' critical expertise and passionate personal engagement. Katerina Chytiri's story “Big Boy Returns Home” signifies on Richard Wright's original story of marginality and displacement, transforming it into a narrative of hope. It imaginatively chronicles Wright's central character, Big Boy, in his move from marginal subject to liminal man. In her story Big Boy returns to his Southern home to find it transformed from a Jim Crow hell to an All-American town, a radical change wrought by the Civil Rights movement, which was a triumph of imagination, language, and ideals. Kristine-Diane Tsiknaki uses Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* to begin a thoughtful reevaluation of the criminal as marginalized individual. In her exploration of the criminal, she calls society, in particular American society, back to one of its foundational beliefs: America is the home of the “second chance.” The essay for me echoes de Crèvecoeur's eighteenth-century description of America, the place where any individual can transform himself and transcend marginality. In “Literature as a Means of Fighting against Racism and Discrimination,” Penny Koutsi anatomizes racial stereotypes in Paul Lawrence Dunbar's “The Lynching of Jube Benson” to show the destructive and tragic folly of imposing a marginal otherness. Rather than treating the story merely as an artifact of American racial history, she extends its meaning to a consideration of her own homeland's continuing struggle to assimilate immigrants and what they mean for the future of Greek society. Turning to women as marginal people, Maria Gogoglou's “Breaking through into the feminine side: Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*” personalizes Atwood's narrative of a young woman seeking the origins of her identity. Gogoglou uses Atwood's narrative as a mirror to explore her own experience and self-perception. In the process, she places the reader in

the marginal position, provoking a reconsideration of attitude and behavior, thus making marginality a place to begin personal transformation. Sofia Politidou's poem "Lullaby to a Little Black Girl" responds to Hughes's short lyric "Lullaby" and transforms it into a praise poem transcending the limits of race and gender, a song of hope for a world where difference isn't marginalized but valued by all. Filio Chasioti's personal reflection on language and marginality, "Excluded Yet Confined: If Language Is the Answer, What Is the Question?" plays with the multivalent marginality of language. Pointing out how language may stigmatize and exclude an individual or group, she also ponders her own experiences learning language and dialects and how that knowledge challenges limits, and creates a fluid and tenuous sense of identity that allows one to move from the marginal gap into the world of the center.

I found the essays in this issue of *Echoes* both illuminating and gratifying. They shed light from many angles on the concept of marginality and its uses, and they gratified because I recognize the writers and the literature that we explored together while I taught at Aristotle University. Finally, they are comforting in a way, too, because they so eloquently confirm the belief that set my professional life in motion: language and literature have the power to transform self and society.

Works Cited

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