

Reproducing Marginality?

Maha Bali

Editor's Note

This was originally posted to [Maha Bali's blog](#) on September 4, 2016.

*marginality [is] much more than a site of deprivation; in fact I was saying just the opposite, that it is also the site of radical possibility, a space of resistance . It was this marginality that I was naming as a central location for the production of a counter-hegemonic discourse that is not just found in words but in habits of being and the way one lives. As such, I **was not speaking of a marginality one wishes to lose – to give up or surrender as part of moving into the center – but rather of a site one stays in, clings to even, because it nourishes one's capacity to resist.** It offers to one the possibility of radical perspective from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds. (p. 149-150, emphasis mine)*

– [bell hooks](#) cited on the [Marginal Syllabus](#) from her book [Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics \(1990\)](#)

I am always struggling with my centredness and my marginality, navigating my intersectionality. It's not navel-gazing specifically, as much as it is an intentional effort to remain aware of my marginality as a way to, I think, not perpetuate marginalizing others. If that makes sense. It nourishes my capacity to resist, as bell hooks says above.

Last month at [Digital Pedagogy Lab Institute UMW](#), I was in a position of power, where I could make choices of how to include others, especially virtually. [This reflection by virtual participant Sherri Spelic](#) tells me my efforts, with the inspiration of seriously reflective, kind and active collaborators (including Sherri herself, and of course Autumm, Kate and Paul) was working towards something. Sherri writes:

*Inclusion is a construction project. Inclusion must be engineered. It is unlikely to "happen" on its own. Rather, **those who hold the power of invitation must also consciously create the conditions for sincere engagement, where underrepresented voices receive necessary air time, where those contributing the necessary "diversity" are part of the planning process.** Otherwise we recreate the very systems of habit we are seeking to avoid: the unintentional silencing of our "included" colleagues.*

(emphasis mine)

What Sherri highlights there is that it is insufficient to just open up an invitation. It is insufficient that once invited, we just leave guests to their own devices and assume the "free market of air time" means we are giving up our power as facilitators. If we do so, if we just say "anyone is welcome" and assume everyone *feels* equally welcome – we aren't

doing our job. It is insufficient to, once we are in a room together, to say, “anyone can speak”, and assume everyone *feels* equally listened to. I am flawed. I will forget to invite someone. I will occasionally talk too much, ignore someone, feel too tired to listen properly, get angry at someone who speaks slowly or too quietly or too much or too little. But you know what? I surround myself with people who can call me out on this gently and constructively (I’m looking at you, Kate and Paul – but also so many others like Sherri and many more). And I am always trying to remain conscious of how we practice inclusion (something Sherri mentions in her article as well).

It is insufficient to open up an invitation and then proceed to “tell” others what to do. I appreciate and applaud Jesse and Sean for giving me pretty much complete freedom over how to run that second workshop at DPLI. I had the choice of whom to co-facilitate with, and I chose Paul Prinsloo onsite and Kate Bowles virtually (here’s [our pre-writeup on it](#), written across three timezones – US/Egypt/Australia). The three of us pretty much had free reign on what to do with that workshop... and as an experiment, it could have been an epic fail, but instead, it felt like an epic opening of possibilities. We wrote:

...for most of us not in the US (or the UK), this [edtech] vision has often signalled top-down, US-to-world, Anglo-oriented, decontextualized, culturally irrelevant, infrastructure-insensitive, and timezone-ignorant aspirations, even when the invitation for us to join in may be well-intentioned.

...

We want to rethink this one-way flow of benefits, and argue instead that all learning is enriched when we have the opportunity to hear from voices markedly different from our own. We want to suggest that when US culture and educational systems are the default for MOOCs and similar platforms, international voices are exoticized, marginalized and silenced at once.

Afterwards, [Kate wrote](#) (building on what Chris Gilliard had said in the post-workshop hallway conversation):

*...if we want Americans to stop thinking of the rest of the world as the exotic, the underserved market, **being present is the place to begin**. We need to make time to hear from each other in workshops like this, at a scale that we can work with. We need to **promote listening well as an activist practice**. And as educators we have to lead this process, and centre it in our teaching.*

Emphasis mine. Being present is just the beginning. Promoting active listening is essential. And yet still not the end of that story.

Points to Ponder

So I just wanted to say that, while I embrace my marginality as a site of resistance (using bell hooks’ words), as I intentionally place myself in this ocean of others with complex power dynamics, I see (on an almost daily basis) the ways in which marginality can be reproduced by things “we”* do. Here are some ways people in power can reproduce the marginality of others (ways we should all work to avoid):

- **Tokenizing.** Bringing in ONE person of color, ONE international person, ONE woman into a sea of white/Western/male others. This is why when Alec Couros asked on Twitter whom on Twitter helps us think critically, [my first tweet back](#) was intentionally completely absent of white American men. It came easily, that first tweet. To think of 140 characters' worth of people of color who inspire me? Easy! How easy is it for you? (*I then wrote something like 5 more lists, with some white men on them, because, really, some white men are quite cool people, and it's not their fault they're white men and all*).
- **Assuming Difference. Assuming Similarity.** This may sound confusing but it isn't. I guess the answer is... don't assume? Sometimes in our sensitivity, we assume difference in order to be respectful. It can be insulting. Sometimes in our attempt to be inclusive, we assume similarity; it can be stifling. Just like every individual in the majority is different, every individual in each minority is different, and therefore they are *differently* similar/different to you. Take two Western-educated Egyptians and they will have different situations and life conditions that empower/disempower them. You can't know *a priori* what that's going to be like.
- **Unintentional Forgetting.** No. Of course it's unintentional. But that's the point, we need to *intentionally not forget*. Inclusion isn't a side effect. It needs to be an intentional choice, and with it comes responsibility
- **Not Listening to the Marginal.** Bringing in someone marginal, and then not listening to them properly is almost worse than not bringing them at all. We need to be aware that listening to the marginal takes effort. They are already going outside of their own discourse of comfort in order to be understood by the more powerful. Listening to the marginal is *hard*. The powerful need to make an effort to make room, but also to listen closely.
- **Silencing the Marginal.** This is such a big deal. To be aware of how our actions (subtle and overt) could silence a marginal person.

*You noticed I say "we" a lot here, right? Because in some contexts, I am in power. I am the teacher. Even if there is a class of men, I'm still their teacher and I have some power in that context. In a Virtually Connecting session I am virtual but I often have the power of invitation. I can choose to keep the call open to anyone. Or I can choose to target certain people and not others, to email them private invitations. I can choose to call on someone or not (gently or not). For Digital Pedagogy Lab, I did a lot of that kind of backchanneling, sending personal invitations in order to ensure sufficient diversity of voices. What's "sufficient" you say? I don't know, but it was noticeable.

In open online spaces, opening doors is not enough.

In open online spaces, an open door means easy exit just as it means easy entry.

In open online spaces, we are not there on equal footing.

In open online spaces, we are not equally fragile.

It is everyone's responsibility to listen and care and support marginal voices. Whether or not they wish to speak. Whether or not they wish to be present. Whether or not they like what we do.

It is everyone's responsibility to recognize their own privilege and to use it with purpose.

Bas keda (Arabic for: "that's it")



This content is provided to you freely by EdTech Books.

Access it online or download it at https://edtechbooks.org/wild/reproducing_marginality.