

Editing as Creative Act

An Experiment in Speculative Thinking

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ABSTRACT

The following is a provocation inspired by my own imagined conversations with the works of five makers and thinkers who have all profoundly shaped my outlook at different times over the last twenty years. These are the American scholar and cultural theorist Laura Harris; the French theatre maker and educator Jacques Lecoq; the British cultural geographer Doreen Massey; the American scholar, feminist, and cultural theorist Jennifer C. Nash; the Brazilian cultural theorist, psychoanalyst, and curator Suelly Rolnik, and American scholar Gregory Ulmer. Together, they form an eclectic but brilliant group of individuals whose writing, thinking, and doing have made me ask questions in new ways.

WHAT IF?

What if we were to imagine the act of editing, for a moment at least, as an act of performance-making?

Or just making?

An act?

Or, to put it another way, what if we were to begin thinking about editing with our bodies?

What if we were to think with our bodies and acknowledge them as vulnerable entities?

Or more simply perhaps, what happens when we acknowledge that editing is an embodied practice?

Or: what if we were to see the words we were working with, the words of others or indeed our own words (which were always the words of others to begin with anyway) as bodies?

Or vulnerable bodies?¹

What if, instead of thinking about editing as an act of revision, verification, amendment, redaction, reduction, we thought of it as a generative act?

An act of generation? Invention? Transformation?

This is not to say that verifying, redacting, reducing, revising are not valuable actions, but what if we didn't *begin* with them?

What if the act of editing were a potential act of reinvention of the present?

What if, viewed like this, it allowed for the germination of other worlds?

What if the editor, myself as editor, positioned herself on the side of curiosity rather than the side of the already known (ULMER 1994, xii)?²

What if we were to imagine the act of editing as an act of learning?

An act of learning with and through the body? An act of performance-making?

What if we thought about the page, the book, as a stage?

As a space?

1. See NASH 2019 for a discussion of mutual vulnerability as central to a black feminist love-politics. In Chapter 4, she argues that vulnerability, as well as witnessing, are crucial to black feminism's long labor of investing in love as a political practice, one that is above all generative and generous.

2. For Ulmer, learning flourishes when it foregrounds invention and speculation rather than verification. He observes how "modes of academic writing now taught in school tend to be positioned on the side of the already known rather than on the side of wanting to find out (of theoretical curiosity) and hence discourage learning how to learn" (xii). He uses the term "heuretics" to define his notion of inventive learning, explaining how it originated as a theological word, the flip-side of hermeneutics. One can interpret scripture (read through a hermeneutic), or one can employ scripture as a means of invention (read it heuretically). For example, hermeneutics asks, "what can be *made of* the Bible?" where heuretics asks "what can be *made from* the Bible?" Ulmer notes how vanguard artists have routinely employed texts generatively (for example, read Sophocles heuretically and you might get to Freud, read psychoanalysis in a similar manner and you might get surrealism). Scholars, on the other hand, have employed vanguard art almost solely as an object of study: as something to explicate and teach.

As a specific place?

What if words, phrases, chapters were bodies to be positioned alongside each other in space, or in a space?

A place?

A specific place?

What if we called that place, in the spirit of Doreen Massey, a “throwntogetherness” (2005, 140), an event, a junction?

As living?

What then, would that make us, as editors?

What if we saw the book or page as a stage in the spirit of Jacques Lecoq: a space full of dramatic possibilities (2019, 165)?³

The page as a space that influences the behavior of the people who enter it (LECOQ 2019, 165)?

What if we were to view the place where editing happens (page, book, screen, stage) as a place where our choices made a difference in the world?

What if we viewed each editorial decision as a political action?

What if we were to consistently challenge exactly what was given space on the page?

What if there were such a thing as editing generatively?

3. For Jacques Lecoq, everything is always in movement — even inanimate objects. Everything has its own dynamic. Spaces then, even empty spaces have their own dynamic and encourage movement in a particular way. He writes, “Any living space has ‘dramatic possibilities’ and influences the behaviour of the people who enter it or the characters who perform in it. A change of place modifies all our attitudes and behaviour, down to the pace at which we walk. We walk around differently on a visit to a Gothic church from the way we walk around a Romanesque church” (2019, 165). He continues, “Taking *Hamlet* as a theme would obviously not involve learning how to construct the set for the first act, but rather showing the future scenographer how spaces must be constructed which *await* the drama to be played out. When he inscribes in space the scenography of *Hamlet*, the space itself will hold the density of the drama. He will have understood that performances are not given in front of a set, but in a dynamic construction where the actors can play with the space” (2019, 166).

What if each act of editing was an experiment in invention and transformation?

What if to edit was to invent?

What if we were to view editing was an act of experimental assemblage?

What if to edit generatively were to take risks, to bring together the unlikely and the unexpected, to juxtapose?

What if I hadn't imagined this before?

What does that say about my thinking? My education? My editing?

What if editing, as an act of invention, as an act of heterogeneous assembling, of making new connections, of placing new bodies next to old bodies next to unheard bodies next to silenced bodies next to different bodies next to different bodies next to different bodies, were an act of opening-out? Of opening-up? Of opening?

Or what if editing were an act of breaking?

What if we, as editors, were to *not* give in to the will of conserving conventions and forms (ROLNIK 2017, 135)?

What if the act of editing might be able to break down imagined and projected hierarchical structures? And real ones?

What if, when editing, we were able to look beyond the racially saturated conceptions of property and ownership (NASH 2019, 137)?

What if each editorial decision had the potential to subvert colonial practices?

What if, in the words of Suely Rolnik, I used my decisions, as editor, to challenge the power of the colonial-capitalistic unconscious (2017, 131)?⁴

4. What I am doing here is playing with Rolnik's beautiful and urgent conception of the "creating-curator" (as opposed to the "creative-curator") and thinking about it in relation to the editor. Or: what if I took her argument about curatorial practices and applied them to editorial practices? For her, the creating-curator is a micropolitical activist, resisting and defending against the reactive forces at play in our colonial-capitalist world through critical and poetic thought and unconventional action. She highlights the importance of reconnecting with

What if editing could be an act of micropolitics (ROLNIK 2017, 128)?

What if the act of editing made more things possible instead of making them less possible?

What if to edit were to create something new? A new way of seeing and feeling? A new form of existence? A new relation with the other?

What if we were to think about, as humans engaged in the act of editing, how we choose the propositions we bring together in our editorial projects? How do we choose where to begin making our editorial cuts on the world's surface (ROLNIK 2017, 132)?

What if, in my role as editor, I was to challenge the criteria with which I chose the words (whose words) to print?

What if, in my role as editor, I stopped to think how I constructed who was “inside” and who was “outside” the boundaries of my own creative, political and intellectual tradition (NASH 2019, 68)?

What then?

What if we were to think about creating a state of play? Of expectancy? Of uncertainty?

What if we were, in our editing practices, to celebrate the uncanny, the unlikely, to celebrate the destabilizing effects they have? To celebrate the fragility that the lack of stability brings (ROLNIK 2017, 135)?

What if, in our editing practices, we were to ignore fears of negative critique, judgement, rejection, repudiation, humiliation, and social exclusion (ROLNIK 2017, 135)?

What if we were to allow time for the germination of new assemblages? Of different combinations? Or difference?

What if we could reimagine the world in each act of editing?

What if we could, through our editing, champion love's radical potentiality (NASH 2019, 113)?

what she calls our “knowing-bodies”, which have been violently but often unconsciously repressed for too long in our current societies.

Champion solidarity? Generosity?

Champion community-building in new ways?

What if we might use the act of editing as a means to revert, pervert, subvert, de-programme, de-install, de-establish, undo, de-configure, disable, disarm, bring down, deactivate, empty, de-fetishize, or simply quit the colonial-capitalistic unconscious (ROLNIK 2017, 135)?

What if, as editors, we were to challenge and reject determinist accounts of history?

To challenge and reject grand narratives and ideals?

What if, as humans who edited, we chose to be unruly? What then? How might we disrupt?

What if our work proposed new models of organization?

What if our work celebrated irreducible difference?

What if our work was always undone?

Always incomplete? Always open? Always improper?

What if we were to reject the closed notion of the singular work whilst remaining open to the possibility of unexpected encounter and contestation?⁵

What if all humans were to see themselves as editors?

What if this were impossible and yet we kept striving towards it?

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Works Cited

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5. The last four questions here are borrowing words from HARRIS 2018 and inspired by her notion of the “undocuments” created by C. L. R. James and Hélio Oiticica.

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