As We May Mark

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Abstract:

This chapter embraces speculative social dreaming to envision possible literacy and learning opportunities associated with platforms as sites of cultural production. Specifically, I speculate about critical literacies that may be possible given everyday platform practices, particularly among learning communities, and to suggest the potential for critical social action that can occur when platforms amplify justice-directed expression. To do so, I examine the literacy practice of annotation—or the addition of notes to texts—to focus on the ways in which platforms can make visible critical reading and writing activities. Annotation exemplifies the nexus of cognition and communication. It is a centuries-old literacy practice prevalent across media artifacts that has thrived with the advent of digital platforms. Annotation also mediates commentary and counternarrative across the Web, in schools, and on the street. Guided by questions about textual collaborations and the social life of texts, I deepen my description of annotation through the example of #SharpieActivism and the middle grades book *Melissa*. This case demonstrates the critical and social qualities of annotation, features educators and librarians in coordinated social activity, emphasizes commitments to justice-directed discourse within and outside of school, and illustrates how the practice of adding notes to texts moves across digital platforms and also analog, on-the-ground actions. The chapter concludes with a discussion of three qualities that are needed should annotation burgeon as a critical literacy practice in our platform society.

"Platforms provide access to audiences, facilitating the discovery of material online through the sharing functionality made available to their users within the networks which the platform has facilitated. Furthermore, they profoundly shape the reception of this material by constituting the environment within which these cultural encounters happen… They constitute a constantly evolving architecture within which everyday forms of cultural production take place."

- Carrigan & Fatsis, 2021, p. 54

Where, reader, have you—as a collaborator[1] joining the social life of this text—encountered *Literacies in the Platform Society*? And what practices will shape your reading and response?

Your relationship with this book, and its intellectual ecology of authors and ideas, is jointly constrained and amplified by platforms. Platforms most likely have, and will, mediate the everyday and academic literacies through which you will access and make meaning with this text. To read, write about, and think with this book is to participate in activities that rely on both the fluidity of texts as cultural objects and the ubiquity of platforms as sociotechnical intermediaries.

You are a textual consumer, reader, and commentator. Your awareness, procurement of, and response to *Literacies in the Platform Society* is brokered by platforms that specialize in knowledge dissemination, commercial transaction, and social interaction. Whether in material or digital form, books are advertised by technologies of aggregation and recommendation. Your decision to buy or borrow this text may be influenced by purchase history and preference, algorithms that anticipate and guide your interests, and code that is used to enhance habits. Scholarly publication platforms, whether associated with corporate enterprises or open-source infrastructures, may serve as repositories for individual chapters of this volume, fracturing the book's cohesive structure in favor of accessibility and reach. Social media platforms will circulate information, connect readers and reviewers, and facilitate discussion. The hashtag #PlatformLiteracies will emerge as a note added to posts shared by the editors, chapter authors, and others. While reading, you may photograph the book's cover or screenshot a marked-up passage, creating media artifacts subsequently posted online with commentary, eliciting reaction from colleagues and publics. And as an educator or scholar, you will sift through this text while crafting syllabi and citation, identifying relevant selections that find their way into learning management systems, multi-authored documents, and reference software.

These are unremarkable observations of quotidian activity. This is a casual snapshot of your social life reading with platforms.

Nonetheless, a repertoire of your literacy practices, stretched across personal and professional contexts, make possible these meaningful textual collaborations—certainly with this book, and likewise with many others, too. We read platforms, we read alongside platforms, and we read because of platforms. We do so while waiting at the post office and when commuting on the subway. Platforms also function as our intermediary when participating in acts of textual analysis and forms of scholarly criticism, however playful or professional the context. Our multimodal compositions as reader response find form and audience because of platforms. Platforms are present in our media literacy, they function as an invited participant, and perhaps are even

indispensable to the ways in which we read, write, remix, and wonder with and about our everyday texts and contexts. Despite the social and economic asymmetries amplified by platforms, so, too, does our proximity with such technology enable creative possibilities and more critical relationships whereby a platform can function, at least in part, "As a means to *accomplish* our ends while denying it the capacity to *define* those ends" (emphasis in original; Carrigan & Fatsis, 2021, p. 140).

If my introduction may be misconstrued as rose-colored commentary, let me balance attention to individual implication with concern for systemic observation: The digital platform as a pervasive, utilitarian genre of technology is neither neutral nor synonymous with beneficence (Edwards, 2021). The ills of platforms are well documented as, at scale, people's intentional use can catalyze hatred and violence (Dwoskin, 2021), amplify conspiracy and misinformation (Frenkel & Kang, 2021), exacerbate unjust labor practices (Gray & Suri, 2019), and reproduce racism and discrimination (Benjamin, 2019; Noble, 2018). Within the field of education, scholars and critics have described how platforms surveil students (Swauger, 2020), inscribe pedagogical authority (Sefton-Green, 2021), and perpetuate extractive relations of "rentiership" (Kolmjenovic, 2021), among myriad other injustices associated with digital capitalism (i.e. Williamson, 2021). These indignities cannot be ignored and perhaps, like me, you are heartened by collective acts of platform refusal (Forman, 2021), pedagogies of dignity (Logan, 2021), efforts to design more just technology (Costanza-Chock, 2020), as well as emerging regulatory policy (Cammaerts & Mansell, 2020). Criticism of platforms is warranted and technological improvement necessary should our social futures with platforms edify healthier economic, civic, and educational relationships.

My approach in this essay privileges provocation over critique and finds favor with speculation. I embrace an orientation toward speculative "social dreaming" (Dunne & Raby, 2013) as a conceptual and pragmatic means of envisioning possible literacy and learning opportunities (Mirra & Garcia, 2020; Ross, 2017) associated with platforms as sites of cultural production (Poell, Nieborg, & Duffy, 2021). Though responsive to the existing sociotechnical arrangements and inequities perpetuated by platforms, a speculative stance can intentionally unsettle reductive definitions of learners' consequential literacy practices. Accordingly, social dreaming is a useful method for envisioning creative and critical expression as facilitated amongst digital platforms, media artifacts, and learning communities (i.e. Marciano & Watson, 2020; Turner & Griffin, 2020). My speculative approach to platform literacies is also resonant with a critical understanding of digital literacy whereby students, educators, and researchers strategically "unbalance" relations of power and authority (Ávila & Pandya, 2013). From snarky memes to social movements, learners can read and write with platforms, as well as create and share various forms of social media, so as to resist injustice, organize collective action, and speak truth to power (i.e. Jenkins, Ito, & boyd, 2016; Pahl & Rasool, 2020). My goal—with words composed, distributed, and perhaps also critiqued via digital platforms—is to speculate about critical literacies that may be possible given everyday platform practices, particularly among learning communities, and to suggest the potential for critical social action that can occur when platforms amplify justice-directed expression.

To do so, the following section introduces a specific literacy practice to focus on the ways in which platforms can make visible critical reading and writing activities. That literacy practice is

annotation, or the addition of a note to a text (Kalir & Garcia, 2021). Annotation exemplifies the nexus of cognition and communication. It is a centuries-old literacy practice prevalent across media artifacts that has thrived with the advent of digital platforms. And annotation mediates commentary and counternarrative across the Web, in schools, and on the street. I will deepen my description of annotation through the example of #SharpieActivism. This case demonstrates the critical and social qualities of annotation, features educators and librarians in coordinated social activity, emphasizes commitments to justice-directed discourse within and outside of school, and illustrates how the practice of adding notes to texts moves across digital platforms and also analog, on-the-ground actions. In my essay's final section, I will discuss three qualities that are needed should annotation burgeon as a critical literacy practice in our platform society.

"Imagine a future where instead of lending someone a book, you lend them your bookmarks – the notes, annotations, and references you've added. What you are really sharing is a collective conversation, the cumulative strata of many layers of marginalia built up through the skillful application of attention."

- Forte, 2020, p. 387

How, reader, do you—as a collaborator extending the social life of texts—annotate books? And what types of notes do you add to texts?

Consider your relationship with the everyday practice of annotation, how your marks of attention are tethered to the analog or digital version of books, and how these notes may move across platforms. Annotation likely accompanies the ways in which you read, write about, and make sense of scholarly texts like *Literacies in the Platform Society*, as well as books read for leisure and other purposes. Holding this book, for instance, your act of reading may be punctuated by handwritten marginalia or scribbled symbols, jottings that aid private meaning-making or anticipate shared commentary. Of course, it is feasible that you prefer not to write in books. Then imagine, alternatively, how reading a digital version of this text—regardless of your chosen device or application—affords annotation that can feature embedded media, like images or videos or GIFs, as well as links to related resources. If motivated to share aspects of your reading online, platforms encourage the authorship of annotation. Your hashtags are annotation, functioning as an explanatory note added to a post. Your alt-text is annotation, providing a descriptive note added to the photograph of a highlighted passage. Your reactions to posts written by those you follow, and whether composed with emoji or commentary, are also annotation, demonstrating the responsive and contextual qualities of platform engagement. It is well-documented how friends, during the Victorian era, exchanged their annotated books with one another as a cherished social activity (Jackson, 2001). Today, platforms broker how you and your friends exchange forms of annotation about books and other texts, evidencing the social qualities of reading and writing as knit together with notes.

These are likely observations of your activity as an annotator. This is an illustrative snapshot of your social life annotating in conjunction with, and as assisted by, platforms.

I have selected annotation as the focal literacy practice of this essay because the act can bring into stark relief the critical—and at times contested—relationships between word and world, author-as-authority and reader-as-respondent, a dominant narrative and necessary counternarrative. Notes added to texts express power. Yet annotation does not, by definition or in practice, always enable critical literacy. Indeed, more conventional approaches to annotation can help students develop disciplinary literacies, as with scientific argumentation (Zywica & Gomez, 2008), or computational literacies, as with programming (Lu & Fletcher, 2009). However, the addition of a note to a text can be expressly critical and make transparent to readers and publics the obfuscation of scientific fact (Willyard, 2018), the racialized and gendered biases of journalism (Trouillot, 2017), as well as the intentional erasure of racism and misogyny from the historical record (Harrell, 2021). Annotation may be written off by some as literally marginal, as the irreverent traces of readership, while for others—especially those responsible for formal schooling—annotation may be perceived solely as an instructional strategy aiding comprehension or literary analysis. Yet artists, organizers, and educators have embraced annotation as a participatory means of highlighting social oppression and advancing dialogue about transformative, justice-directed social change (i.e. Brown, 2019; Kalir, 2021).

Where might we look to see educators' annotation contributing to the social life of books, curricula, and counternarratives? Under what conditions has this annotation been authored and shared? And how have these annotators made visible with public notes and platform-enabled actions their commitment to social change? The multimodal activity associated with #SharpieActivism is a compelling example of annotation expressing power. This case also helps advance our speculative social dreaming about how platforms, broadly construed, can enable educators to author annotation and develop discourses about more just literacy and learning.

During the summer of 2021, and well into the subsequent academic year, K-12 classroom teachers as well as school and community librarians took to social media and shared pictures, videos, and messages with posts tagged #SharpieActivism. Whether the posts appeared on Twitter, TikTok, or elsewhere, a common image was the cover of a book whose original title was crossed out, covered up, or drawn over—often using large black Sharpie marks—alongside the handwritten, and often colorful, addition of an updated title, "Melissa's Story." Annotators did so in response to a request from celebrated author Alex Gino to "fix the title yourself" through marker-mediated "interactive reading" (Gino, 2021a). The invitation to fix, correct, and update the cover was accompanied by Gino's apology for mistakenly using as the book's title "a name for my main character that she doesn't like for herself (i.e. George, the title of the book) instead of her actual name. My main character's name is Melissa, and I apologize to her, to the larger trans community, and to all of my readers for the error" (ibid, par. 1). When, in August of 2021, the Denver Public Library featured *Melissa*[2] during its monthly Book Explorers club, Gino was interviewed and asked about the title change; they replied, "How often do you get to read a book that you changed? Because that's part of the process of reading the book" (Denver Public Library, 2021). Following months of viral activism by adults and youth (as with Figure 1, below), the publisher Scholastic announced in October of 2021 that a new edition of *Melissa*, with a redesigned cover, would become available in April of 2022. Writing for Scholastic's "On Our Minds" blog about this change, Gino stated:

> What we call people matters and we all deserve to be referred to in ways that feel good to us. Calling the book *Melissa* is a way to respect her, as well as all transgender people. The text inside won't change, so the name George will still appear to reflect the character's growth within the novel, but Melissa will be the first name readers will know her by. I hope you'll make the change with us. (Gino, 2021b)

Figure 1: Cover of *Melissa* reimagined by a middle school student (image shared with permission of a school librarian in Colorado).

Melissa, known initially as *George*, is an award-winning novel that was first published in 2015. Gino wrote the story because "I didn't grow up with any positive representations of transgender people in books or other media" (Gino, 2022, FAQ section, par. 1). Melissa, Gino's protagonist, is a fourth-grade student whose family, friends and peers, and teachers perceive—and, throughout the story, also refer to her—as a boy named George. The story shares Melissa's many challenges of recognition, acceptance, and affirmation when coming-out as a transgender girl and becoming recognized for who she is. Though lauded by both readers and reviewers, the American Library Association's Office for Intellectual Freedom has included the book on its "Top 10 Most Challenged Books Lists" every year since it was published, noting that it was "challenged, banned, and restricted for LGBTQIA+ content, conflicting with a religious viewpoint, and not reflecting 'the values of our community'" (American Library Association, 2020). From 2018 to 2020, *Melissa* was the most challenged book in America, indicating ongoing resistance among some constituencies despite the novel's continued social relevance for many readers.

Participation in #SharpieActivism can be read as the literal and symbolic use of annotation to write a counternarrative about transgender justice. Educators and librarians who accepted Gino's invitation leveraged their annotation alongside platform-specific literacy practices. For instance, images and brief messages posted on Twitter stated, "I was finally able to do this on my first day back in the classroom" (Kirr, 2021), and that "I tried to use my best handwriting for our class set" (Hill, 2021). Public libraries also publicized annotated copies of the book, stating for example: "Did we really just write on a library book? Yup. Why? The author asked us to!" (North Canton Library, 2021). An Instagram video by the Bloomfield Public Library, located in Connecticut, shows a librarian marking up copies while standing at the circulation desk, with the post not only tagged #SharpieActivism but also #weserveall and #transpride (Bloomfield Public Library, 2021). The Stoughton Public Library, near Madison, Wisconsin, created a TikTok video with a librarian changing the cover of the book's digital audio version, accompanied by Lizzo's song "Like a Girl," the note "Fixing a mistake," and multiple tags that include #weseeyou, #goodbyedeadname, and #bewhoyouare (Stoughton Public Library WI, 2021).

Public reading and renaming of *Melissa* underscores how those who extend the social life of a book can signal a more just social future. Moreover, social media platforms, which intertwine engagement with activism and organizing, need not constrain in scope where and how a book's enhanced role can affirm the experiences and identities of transgender youth. Educators teach in schools. Librarians assist their communities in libraries. Annotated images of *Melissa* do not only circulate as digital media shared, and reacted to, online. Rather, annotated copies of *Melissa* are "mutable mobiles" (Law & Mol, 2001). That is, the book's material characteristics—as with an altered dustjacket, Gino's invitation printed and added as an insert, or a QR code taped to the cover (Figure 2, below)—varied across settings and time as corrected copies of *Melissa* were displayed on shelves, handed to readers, passed among groups, and changed by those who shared and embodied affinities. Inclusive social dreaming is possible when it is no longer necessary to merely imagine a young reader walking into their public library and locating a book whose cover is not only corrected, but is also affixed with a sticker—yet another form of annotation—that asserts "We Need Diverse Books" (Figure 3, below). That vision is no longer confined to the realm of speculation.

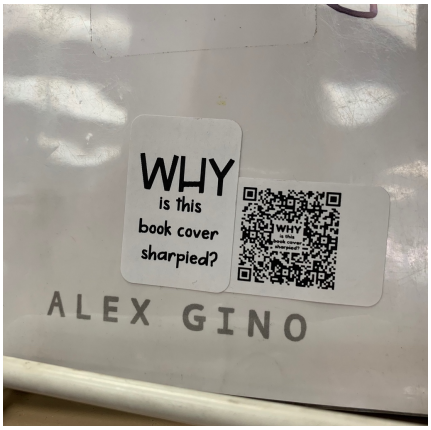

Figure 2: Closeup of *Melissa* from a tweet by North Junior High School Library, in Boise, Idaho, showing two stickers: A QR code and another that asks, "WHY is this book cover sharpied?"

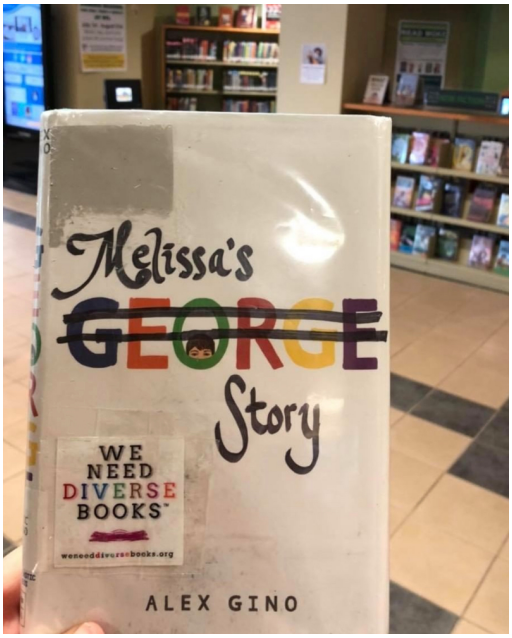

Figure 3: Screenshot from an Instagram post by Onondaga Free Library, near Syracuse, New York, showing the book's "new perfect title" with a sticker from the organization We Need Diverse Books.

#SharpieActivism, a hashtag-as-note added to posts shared across social media platforms, signaled to publics the ongoing need for transgender justice, affirming youth literature, and more inclusive learning communities. It is no surprise that educators and librarians were attuned to how their built learning environments, whether a classroom or reading lounge, could function as a platform that afforded particular social discourses. Collective #SharpieActivism revealed how annotation, as both a multimodal and everyday literacy practice, tethered together sites of expression and resistance. The social life of *Melissa* was stretched from handwritten marks across a book cover, creatively illustrating one form of digital inscription, to typed remarks and tags on social media platforms, showcasing another form of digital composition. Yet the hashtag, as a proxy for the mutability of both books and beliefs, also shifted engagement away from centralized online spaces controlled by corporations, such as Instagram and TikTok, toward civic on-the-ground settings like classrooms and libraries. #SharpieActivism is a remarkable case because it made apparent how the addition of notes to texts reflects, but also transcends, the material features of books, the network dynamics of social media, and the ideologies of digital platforms. Annotators of #SharpieActivism, as readers of *Melissa* and writers of counternarratives, helped co-author justice-directed social dreaming amidst the synergy of critical literacies and platform possibilities.

"Because Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube are so prominent and are so widely amplified by mainstream media, we tend to assume that all social media operate in the same way and suffer from the same problems. This narrow view of social media not only limits our discussions about

social media and its effects, it constrains our imagination about what social media could do or be… Mapping the diverse range of social media 'logics'—different ways social media can and does work—is proof positive that other worlds are possible."

- Zuckerman, 2021, p. 4

Why might we—as collaborators illuminating the social life of texts—author annotation as a critical literacy practice?

In the final section of this essay, let our speculative imagination consider possible relationships with annotation as readers and writers, as educators and scholars. For annotation to thrive as a critical literacy practice in a platformed society, the addition of notes to texts—and whether to analyze a primary source, critique an argument, or promote an idea—should be characterized by three qualities: First, discerning how our participatory social media does, or does not, become platform content; second, divesting our resources and relationships from dominant platform logics; and third, directing our collective action toward learning futures that are more just.

As we may mark,[3] our annotation can function as participatory social media distinguishable from conventional platform content. Posts featuring annotation, as social media, will certainly appear on Facebook. And books featuring annotation, as social media, will also appear on shelves. Yet our activity on the former platform cannot be separated from a logic of commercial extraction and cultural exploitation, whereby annotation becomes yet another form of user generated content. The latter platform, however, is a resilient technology that effectively circulates resources and curates divergent perspectives—albeit at a much smaller social scale. The case of *Melissa* alongside related examples of "hashtag activism" (Jackson, Bailey, & Welles, 2020) demonstrate how the participatory possibilities of annotation—authored and engaged as social media—are readily manifest online and in hand. Both Facebook and bookshelves are platforms, as are school curricula, policy priorities, and learning environments. As annotators, we can decide where our social media appear as we interact with, and mark up, the analog or digital platforms we use every day. We can also discern where our notes productively extend counternarratives, and why other readers might consequently access our annotation to augment their participation in educational, scholarly, and civic actions.

As we may mark, our annotation can help divest attention and resources from harmful platform logics, and reinvest connection and concern in alternative platform relationships. Annotation has long been understood as a useful mark-making strategy that establishes "associative trails" of individual cognition and sense-making (Bush, 1945). We would be foolhardy to dismiss the cognitive and creative value of writing annotation for an audience of one, as a private act bound within a book, leaving traces seldom surveilled much less mined for profit. Yet many readers increasingly accept that they do write annotation as a social resource tethered to a platform that mediates public engagement. Researchers will continue to write annotation when contributing to open peer review (Ross-Hellauer, 2017). Educators will join professional learning initiatives and write annotation to discuss shared interests (i.e. Kalir & Garcia, 2019). Yet to what extent will various annotation-rich activities occur on platforms whose owners and shareholders privilege corporate interests over the knowledge commons? Why may it be necessary to retract our attention, and annotation, from a platform because a record of sociotechnical relationships is

misaligned with ethical commitments? We should not presume to know, much less accept, the platforms that may help to shape and share notes. Our marks, as annotators, can help draw a line in the sand. And that line may also be an arrow. The associative relationships that we establish among texts and notes can serve as a means of shared wayfinding, reorienting our sociotechnical priorities and platforms.

Our annotation can also function as a humble yet pragmatic and easily directed contribution to the collective enactment of justice-directed learning. We can learn from the librarians who marked up *Melissa*, advocated on behalf of transgender youth, and made visible inclusive and affirming narratives in public spaces. It is feasible that they did not think much about annotation as social media when participating in #SharpieActivism. Yet their actions for justice included annotation, and signal how we may write and publicize our future notes as constructive opposition to silence and erasure. We can also learn from educators who, in the summer of 2021, resisted partisan pressure to whitewash American history and organized around a public commitment to teach about systemic legacies of racism and oppression. It is likely these educators did not think about #TeachTruth, either the hashtag or social movement, as related to annotation. Yet by retrospectively tracing the effort's social life online and across the country, we glimpse how educators' handwritten and digital notes contextualized dominant historical narratives, adorned teach-ins at local historical sites, and contested curricular biases (Zinn Education Project, 2021). Irrespective of professional responsibility, our labor in service of greater educational equity should make use of annotation, as both easily composed and broadly comprehensible, when we amplify counternarratives relevant to the lives of our students and colleagues. Annotation can be written and read as an accessible indicator of rightful presence or necessary resistance, functioning—amongst a repertoire of literacy practices, and in response to pressing sociopolitical injustices—as the referent of collective agency and power. As we may mark, may we draft liner notes that record our pursuit of more just learning futures.

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[1] The term "collaborator" refers to Bryant's (2002) *The fluid text: A theory of revision and editing for book and screen*. Bryant has suggested textual stability is a myth. Fluidity, according to Bryant, is inherent to the composition, revision, publication, and reception of texts, as with *Literacies in the Platform Society*. Textual "collaborators" include individuals who edit and review manuscripts, as well as those whose material alterations—including annotation—change the ways in which texts are perceived, read, and understood.

[2] Per Gino's request, I use the book's updated title throughout my essay. Gino's initial public invitation to readers was to retitle their book as "Melissa's Story," as announced during the summer of 2021, and the name "Melissa's Story" was associated with the subsequent social media campaign. The new title *Melissa* was formally announced by Scholastic, in coordination with Gino, in the late fall of 2021.

[3] As with the title of my chapter, this section features intertextual reference to Bush's (1945) *As we may think*, a foundational essay in the history of computing about the relationships among annotation, information architecture, networked knowledge, and human wisdom.