A SYLLABUS, IN CIRCUITS

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“A final seminar-length paper (~8000 words) on a subject drawn from the subject matter of the course. This can be focused on a negotiation of the theoretical texts themselves or an application of the work to a text or texts (configured broadly: remember, everything is a text) which need not have been covered in class but should not have already been conspicuously paired in the past.”

CIRCUITS

The conspicuous paring of eight primary and twenty-two secondary texts for a course titled “Cultural Theory” held in the Fall semester of 2018 at a university in the American South opens up the opportunity to consider each of these works in a conversation around a single text: the course syllabus. This syllabus is an assemblage of sorts, for its current and future potentialities are histories to be laid bare. More concretely, let us interpret the syllabus like a book, as a bibliographic document, an object for study both in its collections of functions as well the cultural circuits where the syllabus moves. But while considering the interactive plateaus where the

1 Writer’s note: Where possible, I am obscuring specific names and places in my prose to avoid the perception that I am intentionally criticizing any particular individual, institution, or rhizome.

2 Hereafter, “syllabus.”

3 “Something printed or written in multiple copies that its agent, be it author, stationer, printer, or publisher, or any combination thereof, produces for public consumption. This can include anything from a multi-volume set to a slip of paper. The controlling factors is thy the document was designed to perform a a specific function.” See Thomas R. Adams and Nicholas Barker, “A New Model for the Study of the Book,” in A Potence for Life: Books in Society, edited by Nicholas Barker (London: The British Library, 1993): 13.
syllabus emerges and engages with other assemblages, be they readers, conference tables, or rubbish bins, it is not necessarily true that the syllabus’ material histories do not matter. Deleuze and Guattari’s abstraction — an attempt to ontologically flatten all materiality in infinite relation to itself — erases the very peculiar tracing of printed objects in cultural contexts. Yet Deleuze and Guattari’s metaphor of the rhizome does pair neatly with thinking about how bibliographic documents move in communications circuits. Whether one adopts Adams and Barker’s bibliocentric model, Darton’s original conception of a communications circuit to inform the study of the history of books, of Love’s reconnection and extension of the circuit is not the point; although the argument to follow will often invoke these intertwining theoretical perspectives. Instead, what’s at stake here is value in considering the


5 It’s worth considering book historian David Scott Kasten’s description of the production, transmission, and reception of texts as “the new boredom.” Yet this is Kasten’s, mine, and potentially all of our boredom to engage; just as it is Deleuze and Guattari’s chosen boredom to imagine life through flattened ontological spectacles.

circulatory interconnections between various agents in cultural contexts by interrogating a single graduate course syllabus. Let us begin by thinking about the authorial machines involved in producing the “little machine” that is the book, the bibliographic document: the syllabus.⁷

SOURCES

The author of the syllabus, at least in part, is an individual human professor. As a marker of authorship, the syllabus contains both the professor’s name and email address in the first lines of the document. As the syllabus is attached to the course the professor taught in the Fall of 2018: one could make the straightforward assertion that he is the sole author of the document. At first glance, the prose of the syllabus alludes to the notion of the professor as the author: “This is a graduate course; as such, the reading load is unwieldy, untenable, and unfair. Suffice it to say, I am aware of this. Do your best to keep up. If you are struggling, come and see me and we’ll figure it out.”⁸ Here, the use of the first person “I” and “we” points the reader to imagine a conversation between a single individual and themselves. The use of the second person “you” and “your” also suggests advice given by the author to an

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⁷ For a further discussion on books-as-machines, see A Thousand Plateaus, 4-7.

⁸ Syllabus, 1.
imagined reader; in this case, a student in the doctoral-level course. Finally, the allusion to an implied “they” — a third-person — reading load that “I am aware of,” speaks to the author’s apprehension of objects and agents that are at once in conversation with both the writer and the reader while simultaneously exogenous from them. Thus it is reasonable to conclude, or at least speculate, that the authorial functions of the syllabus stem from a single individual.

Yet there are numerous aspects of the document which call such a simplistic reading of the syllabus into question. Take, for example, the several references to the university present in the document. The syllabus indicates a grading scale for the university, both in descriptive and quantitative forms. If this is university policy, then it was not authored by the professor alone, at least in an original and creative sense. The authorial functions of the syllabus then include not only solitary and collections of humans, but Althusser’s conception of ideological state apparatuses as well. Several committees of perhaps unknown members likely created the university grading scale at an indeterminate time in history, all within the university

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9 Syllabus, 2.

structure. It is also possible that such a university-wide policy, for this scheme is applicable in undergraduate and graduate courses from accounting to zoology, aligns with other university systems in the state; tangential but significant oversight bodies, commissions, and groups, and even legislative committees, documents, and rule-sets. The implication presented by the inclusion of the university grading scale in the syllabus is that this document may be a collection of authorial functions. One can read the syllabus paragraphs on Academic Integrity and Disability with a similar perspective. In the former case, the syllabus includes specific language, “Students at [the university] are expected to maintain the highest ethical standards;” a statement authored not by the professor, but likely by committee members at the university and in direct reference to authority granted by the state legislature. In the latter, the syllabus includes language that refers to a United States federal government policy, the Americans with Disabilities Act, alongside prose and contact phone numbers likely crafted not by the professor, but by policymakers at the university.11 Thus upon further consideration, it is worth acknowledging the prospect that the syllabus in question, and indeed, speculatively, that many, most, or even all university

11 Syllabus, 3.
syllabi are complexes of intertwining authorial relationships created beyond that of the professor who is teaching the course. That any document has no single author is hardly surprising, as generations of humanities scholarship make clear. For example, textual criticism including bibliographic studies has been an important, interdisciplinary niche on campuses around the world for well over one hundred years. Absent of an exhaustive literature review of the field, one can easily look to McGann’s concept of the contextual condition, where the material, and thus authorial, production of text is a function of exchanges between individuals and groups. Instead of a text having no author, or authorship simply suctioning as a set of overlapping discourses, the authorship of any particular bibliographic document remains a site of collaboration and competition between various agents across and within different planes, rhizomes working in acts of territorialization and deterritorialization.

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Several of the readings that make up the syllabus’ textuality unsettle the trope of the solitary authorial functionary. Marx and Engles explicitly collaborated in writing The Communist Manifesto, and Engles’ editorial work and material contributions to Marx both funded the authorship of the first three volumes of Capital. Adorno and Horkheimer explicitly inform their reader that their ideas are inexorably intertwined. Writing the preface to the 1969 edition of Dialectic of Enlightenment, Horkheimer and Adorno claim that “...we both feel responsible for every sentence. We dictated long stretches together; the Dialect derives its vital energy from the tension between two intellectual temperaments which came together in writing it.” In a similar vein, Deleuze and Guattari playfully disrupt their reader’s expectations of authorship:

“The two of us wrote Anti-Oedipus together. Since each of us was several, there was already a crowd. Here we have made use of everything that came within range, what was closest as well as farthest away. We have assigned names clever pseudonyms to prevent recognition. Why have we kept our own names? Out of habit, purely out of habit. To make ourselves unrecognizable in turn. To render imperceptible, not ourselves, but what makes us act, feel, and think. Also because it’s nice to talk like everybody else, to say the sun rises, when everybody knows it’s only a manner of speaking. To reach, not the point where one no longer says I, but the point where it is no longer of any importance whether one says I. We are no longer ourselves. Each will know his own. We have been aided, inspired, multiplied.”


17 A Thousand Plateaus. 3.
Their schizophrenia on public display, Deleuze and Guattari contend that authorship, like personhood, is no longer a paramount concern. Yet the pleasure of invoking an I, an author, is a necessary condition to engage in cultural practices such as simple conversation. Thus, we can de-center authorship, both engage and erase authorship in its variety of rhizomes and yet we still talk about a bibliographic document in a way that, even if only a manner of speaking, to reflect the patina of stability in an author’s name. Perhaps we can speak in bibliographic terms, for the citation of any text signifies the complexity of the authorial functions that involve people and publishers, agencies and institutions, geographies and temporalities. But we cannot communicate, even in the academy, with constant references in full bibliographic details. Such rhetorical practice would indeed be madness, perhaps further sequestering ourselves beyond our present social confinement in our institutions.\(^\text{18}\) So we sustain the fiction of a single author and get on with things.

\(^{18}\) Perhaps there’s a case to be made that the academy itself is a form of asylum. The mad are locked away from the rest of society, their labor structured – and increasingly so – so as to appear to outsiders as conforming to late-capitalist values regarding useful work, and are only able to communicate through intermediaries such as students who simply visit (or if they stay, they too become mad) and public-facing administrators who speak on behalf of the institution. See Michele Foucault, *Madness and Civilization* (New York: Vintage, 1988).
When one looks at the syllabus, and by extension, any syllabus, the name of the professor at the top of the first page may not reflect the totality of authorial functions that went into creating a specific bibliographic document. Highlighting how policies and practices that the professor may or may not support, for the university requires that all syllabi share a degree of standardization, demonstrates the extent to which other pedagogical possibilities become obscured. For example, there are ethical and research-based arguments against the use of quantitative or even letter grades as a mode of pedagogy.\footnote{Again, a digression to the volume of scholarship on this subject at this point in a seminar paper would be counterproductive. The reader may find it useful to consider the field of critical pedagogy in general, as well as specific work by Joe Bower, Paulo Freire, Henry A. Giroux, bell hooks, Alfie Kohn, and Colin Ward, as an entree into thinking about teaching and learning without quantitative assessment.} Several institutions of higher education in the United States eschew the C20 practice of grading. By framing grading as a matter of university policy in the syllabus — itself derived not only from the professor but from authorial sources exogenous to the class itself — the syllabus indicates a professorial acquiescence to a specific mode of intellectual and academic production that privileges and incentives labor towards a narrow field of measurement: the grade. Like other quantitative indices of the neoliberal university, grades exist alongside narrowly-
constructed and interpreted performance surveys and evaluations that can be used to sublimate the university laboring class, the professoriate, to the interests of the bourgeoisie managerial, administrative class. In turn, graduate students encounter an always-already phenomenon of academic performance, a supreme irony in a doctoral program rooted in “program is our strong belief that human societies, cultures, languages, and literatures are most fruitfully understood through comparative modes of analysis that include an ever-changing landscape of theory and methodologies.” The syllabus works to plug students into the machine of neoliberal university performance structures, pre-configuring modes of thinking and behaviors as a result of the authorial functions articulation that bring the syllabus into being and contact with others. Thus, examining the authorial functions of the syllabus point to the pedagogical and intellectual strata — a grade-less classroom or a situationally-created reading list and set of assessments — that can never find themselves in the syllabus due to the discursive power of university-determined policy and practices.

CONNECTORS

The creation and circulation of the syllabus is a complex affair; a product of late-capitalist technological phenomena and, in particular, communicative cultures inherent to
neoliberal university practices. The syllabus is published both in paper and electronic forms, and there are significant histories and implications for considering the materiality of each form in conjunction with their respective flows from authorship functions to receptive agents and communities. First, the syllabus comes into production during the era of desktop publishing; a distinct period emerging alongside the dominant publishing culture of industrial publishing and the diminishing, but never vanishing, culture of letterpress publication.20 Electronic desktop publishing capabilities allow the professor to assemble their ideas as well as informational flows from the authorial functionaries into a single text. This process likely involves editing and revising, cutting and pasting, and other iterative writing processes in conjunction with tools and technologies peculiar to our cultural moment.

The syllabus is both an original creation and a reproduction of material. In the latter case, there is a distinct aesthetic contrast between reading the paragraph on “Academic Integrity” on the second page of the syllabus, nestled in between paragraphs on attendance and disability, and viewing

the totality of reading the stark university policy “Regulation 4.001 Code of Academic Integrity” as a standalone text. Crafted in stark legalese by a an unknown cadre of university functionaries, “Regulation 4.001” presents the reader with a stern atmospheric sensibility, conveying a looming sense of impersonal authority; an affective form of power different from the prose interpreted by readers who are navigating multiple lines of information while reading the syllabus on the first day of their graduate seminar. Thus, desktop publishing capabilities allow for the reproduction of an aesthetic object that simultaneously grants the writer of the syllabus the independence to remix and re-imagine “Regulation 4.001” while simultaneously divorcing the rule from its original space.21

Once created on the professor’s computer — or computers, as it is common for individuals to have access to multiple devices to create texts — the syllabus is printed for circulation. Again, this printing technology is only possible as an outgrowth of the trajectory of industrial publishing, scaled down to become available to can fit a networked office copier into their workspace, or even a desktop printer in their office. Contemporary digital printing technologies trace its roots to

electronic printing technologies in middle C20 industrial cultures. Syllabi created and printed during different historical and cultural periods were made using different technologies that prefigured or even foreclosed the type of information included, the materials used, as well as the means of circulating the syllabus between teacher, student, and beyond. The printed syllabus exists as a material text on double-sided 8.5” by 11” white paper, stapled in the upper left-hand corner, with text crafted in 12-point serif font in bold, italics, and normal type, formatted in center-, left-, and column-justified sections. Revealed as a complex bibliographic document reflective of a history of cultural and technological formations, the syllabus arrived to students in paper form on the afternoon of 22 August 2018; hand-delivered to the class by the professor.

But The syllabus does not only exist in the previously-described paper form. Outside of draft and dummy copies organized by the professor, the syllabus also exists in published digital form. Indeed, there are at least three different published versions of this syllabus. These versions reflect changes made to the syllabus during the academic term, to accommodate the changing dynamics of the coursework such as newly-added or excluded readings, or manifest changes to the
academic calendar as a whole. Rather than reprinting these revised additions, the professor published these iterative updates to the syllabus in the university-approved learning management system (LMS).

The rise of the LMS in the contemporary university is often heralded as an innovative way of streamlining information delivery, improvising classroom connectivity and discussion, or even as a site for expanding the university as a whole. The LMS certainly provides a space for students to download readings for the graduate seminar, as well as to receive copies of each iteration of the syllabus; this avoiding costly reprinting and time spend recirculating the syllabus each time changes occur. Yet the ubiquity and policing function of the LMS, powers that have become commonplace in early C21 academic settings, also work to circulate the syllabus in important ways. Students do not have unlimited access to the syllabus or any other materials published to the LMS. Equally, any comments made on the LMS public discussion boards or even messages composed or sent through the LMS messaging service can be monitored and disseminated beyond the community of students and the professor in the classroom. Professors do not maintain intellectual property rights or even control over the syllabi for courses they facilitate. Indeed, contracts, policies, and other
agreements between the university and the corporate LMS provider leave open the possibility that any syllabi, set of course materials, or whole courses published in the LMS are recirculated, re-used, and reproduced in ways beyond the original nexus of professor, students, and seminar. Thus the syllabi, published in electronic form on the university LMS, comes to serve as a signifier for a range of neoliberal university practices that alienate intellectual and material labor from the professor and students in the classroom.

Once again, we return to problematize Deleuze and Guattari’s claim that the act of creating a book is an inconsequential phenomenon. The paper text of the syllabus is constructed, policed, and engaged with differently than the electronic text. The paper copy can contain marginalia, can be passed to students who drop the course who may have secretly wanted to get the reading list and then read on their own, or could go from a student’s hand’s to a rubbish bin, to the recycling facility; perhaps to be reincarnated as the the printed form of this very monograph. In contrast, the electronic syllabus reflects the aesthetics and practices of the profit-driven university through the signification of technocratic

\[22 \text{ A Thousand Plateaus, 4.}\]
management practices, as well as pedagogies divorced from in-person learning experiences.

LOADS

Reading, of the consumption of text, does not necessarily follow a writer’s intent, even when one keeps an imagined reader in mind. Understanding the consumption of the syllabus is largely a speculative affair. Absent of readers’ published notes, comments posted to the LMS, or other evidence of public discourse, garnering an understanding of the ways in which the readers make sense of the syllabus at particular moments is likely best understood as an act of critical fabulation. But it is not difficult to imagine the variety of acts performed by readers of the syllabus in their interpretive community; a head-nod between each, acknowledging a shared set of knowledge and information as they read through the syllabus that first time on 22 August 2018.

Instead of reading the syllabus in solitary fashion, readers do so publicly, negotiating quietly with their

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23 For example, Said uses his 1994 “Afterword” to express regret to the various ways in which the central claims were misread or misinterpreted. See Edward Said, Orientalism (New York: Vintage, 1994): 329-352.


colleagues about the nature of the assignments: brief
descriptions of the “Daily Responses,” “Discussion Leading,” and
the “final seminar-length paper” with its original 8000-word
requirement. Each reader’s syllabus likely contains marks,
underline, highlighting, or other marginalia in and around
various portions of the text. Strong marks for readings they’re
familiar with and exclamations for those texts to avoid applied
to the paper as they thought about which weeks they’d have to
present. Readers not only read their syllabus closely, or
perhaps not as they will have regular access to this document in
the future to refer to, but also in context with other texts.
Readers look at the “Tentative Schedule” and consider which
texts slated for which dates they want to present on; cognizant
of their workload in their other graduate seminars, teaching
schedules, future conference attendance, and more.

Our readers’ practices reflect the ordinary academic
culture of late-capitalist graduate academic culture at the
university. Rejecting any ideal-type of scholarly practice,
readers encounter and make sense of their syllabus concerning

26 Syllabus, 1-2.
27 Syllabus, 3.
28 Raymond Williams, “Culture is Ordinary (1958),” in Resources
of Hope: Culture, Democracy, and Socialism (London: Verso,
reference to their labor, their material and social conditions, and the long-trajectory of practices and behaviors that they’ve carried with them up to this point. Readers are single and partnered, parents, not-yet, and never-will-be. Readers are full-time and part-time Ph.D. students. Readers have health insurance and stable employment, and have precariat employment, poverty wages, and no health care. Readers have complex social lives outside any seminar classroom. They are working intellectuals in particular cultural conjunctions.

How then does the syllabus, or indeed any university syllabus in our late-capitalist moment square up with its readers? How do syllabi, those we consume and those we produce, engage in a meaningful intellectual discourse? To what extent do our syllabi reinforce particular values of achievement and modes of (re)production? There is not perfect or idealized syllabus; no standard means of creating and interpreting a text that always-already produces engaging scholarly learning. Rather, it is worth asking how any syllabi can become an open terrain, a site to collaboratively work towards a shared set of rigorous and relevant intellectual production: a syllabus without guarantees.29

SWITCHES

Examining the production, transmission, and consumption of the syllabus opens up ways of seeing the traces of dominant practices, meanings, and values in contemporary academic culture. This hegemony is in place as a function of the deliberate efforts of intellectuals hailing from the dominant cultural group. What has become pedagogical common-sense, the instrumentalism, the policy-driven determinism, and the modes of assessment, is not ahistorical, but the byproduct of a conscious effort to promote and maintain a bourgeois status quo of individualism, achievement, and measurement.30 But these educational conventions are not determinative, nor do they necessarily have staying power, for they are simply selective traditions passed off as a fiction of the only available university practices. Instead, the contemporary neoliberal university culture occurs alongside a legacy of residual practices and an emerging academic and scholarly culture.31 We can observe and develop alternative academic practices in these


structures of feeling, outside of the dominant culture; for culture is the ground in which transformations are worked out.\textsuperscript{32}

Any machine, be it industrial, digital, or cultural, functions through a complex series of interrelated sources, connections, loads, and switches. Running in parallel instead of series, capital’s cultural circuits connect sources of dominant cultural power and practices to ever-consuming loads, readers and thinkers in every conceivable space including the confines of the graduate seminar. Where universities once possessed the insulation to withstand capital’s penetration, their wood, glass and paper resistors are losing their capacity in the face of money-commodities-money flows in tertiary educational circles.\textsuperscript{33}

Switches play a key role in these circuits, and indeed any circuit. Acknowledging the presence of electricity, packets of data, or ideological praxis, switches regulate, divide, or outright close off flows of information; even temporarily. Our switches in the university can be as dynamic as a committee or as elegant as a document. A syllabus-as-switch can be the site of disruption, a redirection of intellectual labor away from


reproducing capital’s values and towards making our own. Our syllabi can be literary, not simply as a well-written aesthetic expression, but an articulation of counter-narratives to reinforce and amplify our questions and values, our histories, and our perspectives on change. Let us take hold of the switches and reclaim our syllabi as literature.

34 "a work which is fictional, or which yields significant insight into human experience as opposed to reporting empirical truths, or which uses language in a peculiarly heightened, figurative or self-conscious way, or which is not practical in the sense that shopping lists are, or which is highly valued as a piece of writing," see Terry Eagleton, The Event of Literature (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012): 25.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


