

RACHEL TOOR

## Unconscious Plagiarism

Do we really have a handle on what exactly plagiarism is and why exactly it's wrong? And what might happen if we were to rethink these assumptions? According to Rachel Toor, it's possible that such an effort might actually result in a new kind of educational opportunity: a chance to explore not only how we think about cheating, but also how we think about the purpose and goals of learning altogether. Toor is an assistant professor of creative writing at Eastern Washington University. This essay first appeared in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* in 2011.

**I AMUSES ME IN THE CLASSROOM WHEN I HEAR STUDENTS QUOTING me back to myself.** As my peculiar sentences and ideas come out of their mouths, I smile and wonder if they are aware they are parroting me. They repeat things I've said as if they were Platonic forms of ideas.

It kind of makes me think I'm doing my job. Thomas Jefferson wrote, "He who receives an idea from me, receives instruction himself without lessening mine; as he who lights his taper at mine, receives light without darkening me."

One of the things I say to my students is that good writers steal. By that, I mean that when you read like a writer, you look to see the moves and tricks that other authors are using, and you seek to emulate them. Of course I don't mean copying specific words or sentences, but adopting ways to build tension on a line-by-line level, tricks to make fluid transitions, and the ability to create beauty by putting unlike things next to each other.

So in my writing courses, we look at Martin Luther King Jr.'s sentences and copy his structure. We examine what happens between John McPhee's paragraphs, and we study Joan Didion's curious juxtapositions.

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be a popular form of learning. How many of us had to be able to recite, as English majors, the first 10 lines of *The Canterbury Tales* in the original middle-muddle of the language? How many English majors still do?

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So when I hear my own words and ideas come flying back at me, I try to take it as the sincerest form of flattery. At least when it comes from my students.

Years ago, I dated a scholar who was well and widely published. When I saw my ideas and sentences appear in print in his books and articles, it did not please me. If you're such a big fat deal, I thought (and may have said), come up with your own damn ideas and sentences. As an editor, I never maintained ownership over things I added to manuscripts. It was my job to improve a manuscript. As a girlfriend, however, it was a different story. I felt tripped off.

Recently a friend, a graduate student in another discipline I've informally mentored for years, sent me a draft of an essay he was working on. I read it with interest; my interest piqued when I recognized neologisms, linguistic tics, and ideas on his pages. At first I thought: Gee, this sounds familiar. Then I thought: Are you freaking kidding me?

When we exchanged e-mails, I told him I was surprised to see him making choices in his writing that sounded so much like mine.

Unapologetic, he responded, "I do everything I can to steal (I mean learn) from you, whether it's word choice or big ideas. How the hell else am I supposed to get any better at this?"

I don't want to be chary with either my ideas or my willingness to help friends. But sometimes that kind of thing can feel like a blow, even though I know it does nothing to diminish me.

Attribution is as easy as appropriation, or it should be. I may go too far to make sure that I give credit to those whose words, phrases, or ideas so delight me that I can't help but flich them. If I use someone else's writing exercise in class, for example, I say, "I stole this from my thesis adviser, Judy Blunt." Or I'll write, "As my friend Jeff-the-economist likes to say," in certain cases. I love citing the provenance: I once heard Mary Karr quoting Martin Amis who quoted Ian McEwan as saying something like, "When you publish a book you become an employee of your former self." Putting myself in that company makes me feel good.

But there are so many things—phrases, exercises, classroom tricks—I've pilfered from others that for many of them, I couldn't tell you the original source. Sometimes phrases from Wallace Stevens or Milton show up in my prose, sometimes a line from an Elvis Costello song. Even if my aim is true, I don't know how much I'm stealing at any given time. Unconscious plagiarism is the cost of paying attention to language.

My friend Nancy pointed out, when I was in mid-fume about this issue, that Mark Twain said Adam was the only person who...

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certain he wasn't a plagiarist. When I got home, I Googled the quote and found Twain actually wrote, "What a good thing Adam had. When he said a good thing he knew nobody had said it before."

Nancy's version was, I thought, funnier. Only she and I would know if I tried to pass off her version as my own. But the fact is, she and I would know.

I also found a passage from Twain about how a friend complimented the dedication in *The Innocents Abroad*, saying he'd always admired it, even before he'd seen it in Twain's book. "Of course, my first impulse was to prepare this man's remains for burial," Twain wrote, but then the two friends went to a bookstore and found the original in Oliver Wendell Holmes's book. To Twain's surprise, he discovered, "I had really stolen that dedication, almost word for word. I could not imagine how this curious thing had happened; for I knew one thing, for a dead certainty—that a certain amount of pride always goes along with a teaspoonful of brains, and that this pride protects a man from deliberately stealing other people's ideas."

Twain then remembered reading and rereading Holmes's poems until his "mental reservoir was filled with them to the brim." He wrote to Holmes to apologize, and the gracious guy wrote back that he "believed we all unconsciously worked over ideas gathered in reading and hearing, imagining they were original with ourselves."

What I'm talking about here is clearly nothing new. In a 2007 Harper's essay called "The Ecstasy of Influence," Jonathan Lethem looked carefully, historically, and smartly at this phenomenon called "cryptomnesia," and at related concepts of plagiarism, collage art, and the limits of copy-right. More recently, David Shields published a cranky book, *Reality Hunger*, a large chunk of which is unattributed quotes to make his argument about all art being theft. There is much talk in the wider culture about memes, and about the spreading and replicating of ideas.

How much, though, do we talk about this in academe?

In our teaching, we all stand on the shoulders of those giants who have lectured and seminar-ed us. Does it make any sense to say where we learned what we learned? Do students care? Should we? Even though scholars make a fetish out of footnoting, where do we give credit to ideas or innovations whose provenance we're not exactly sure of? Sometimes it's hard to tell where your original notion ended and where it was driven further by conversation with a friend or colleague. We're in the business of intellectual exchange; it's an economy with little currency in the real world, so we have to value in-group bartering. I wonder if that makes us more possessive of what we think is ours.

I used to be surprised when academics so worried about being scooped they were reluctant to take ideas for test-drives at conferences. But then I heard horror stories about stolen research and plagiarized

theses, about grad students and junior colleagues having their name off published papers to which they had contributed substantially. I wonder if a scholar would do something like that? Where is the pride that goes with a teaspoonful of brains? Is unconscious plagiarism less morally than outright theft, even if the result is the same?

I think about the trope-stealing boyfriend, sentence-parroting dents, and the friend who plays dress-up in my linguistic quirks, wonder if petty pissiness might give way to rage if what these imitators pilfered was something that mattered.