print]) but also worldwide (e.g., the growing BDS [boycott, divestment, and sanctions] movement). In an increasingly precarious situation where Palestinian life and political existence are every day more threatened, the stakes of transcolonial identification are higher than ever.

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Misquoting Benjamin

To the Editor:

Probably Walter Benjamin has no one to blame but himself, but quotations from his books show up in the strangest places with much stranger meanings. His fault or not, it is surely significant whether we are being just to those fine phrases. The possibility of injustice arises whenever we attach an idea to someone else's name and thereby borrow some authority for our own. It may be as significant as the way we attach evidence to an accused person before the law. In either case, quotation can veer off into a dangerous misuse. How we deal with books usually reveals the way we deal with people. Fracking a piece of language out of a book and burning it up as fuel to drive our own argument should not count as just representation, and yet it is standard practice. I wonder whether we might not want to change that practice. As Heine noted a long time ago, "Dort wo man Bücher verbrennt, verbrennt man auch am Ende Menschen" ("Where they burn books, they will one day burn people too").

Benjamin, of course, could play rather fast and loose with quotations himself, and he had his own ideas about re-creating texts to support his purposes. In his essay on Goethe's novel *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* (*Elective Affinities*), Benjamin wrote that the sun never appeared over the gloomily lit landscape in which the story unfolds ("Goethe's Elective Affinities"; *Selected Writings*; vol. 1 [Belknap–Harvard UP, 1996; print; 303]). Yet Goethe built his story around three dramatic appearances of the sun, and most of the novel's events occur under normal conditions, including bright skies on spring days. Benjamin's essay "The Storyteller" cites the close of a short story by Johann Peter Hebel, "Unverhofftes Wiedersehen" ("Unexpected Reunion"), to support his contention about the place of death in storytelling. The protagonist, an old woman, "is called away by death," as Benjamin puts it (*Selected Writings*; vol. 3 [Belknap–Harvard UP, 2002; print; 152]). But Hebel's text does not end with death. The actual close provides a quite different meaning. The story ends as the speaker, having made a remark about commitments and obligations in life, turns away from her betrothed's graveside and returns to the realm of the living (*Sämtliche Schriften*; vol. 2 [Müller, 1990; print; 284]).

Benjamin marks the significance of death as the point from which even the humblest life acquires the vivid enclosure that permits it to be retold, and from which a moral may be drawn. That is the basis on which he offers his conception of the "authority of death" that accrues to the storyteller, that most modest of speakers, the figure in whom the righteous man encounters himself.

How different, then, the pomp and excess of a national event dressed up for maximum effect by the political heirs to the most powerful leader in the western hemisphere, the funeral of a man who had led a nation through a horrific war. We pause, rapt, and take a sharp breath reading Walt Whitman's noble poem "When Lilacs Last in the Door-Yard Bloom'd," and we could just leave it at that; yet Simon Gikandi has not left it at that when he invokes Benjamin's name in his editor's column "From Penn Station to Trenton: The Language Train" (128.4 [2013]: 865–71). The righteous man's perspective might alert us to the fate of the vast authority that President Lincoln had wielded in his life. It might make us pause again, give us time to hatch the suspicion that putting his coffin on display during its long journey through the country he had led transfigured his mortal remains into a motif in

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another kind of story—a history to which Benjamin's words bring a different meaning. Was that object transformed into something closer to a cultural treasure, the kind of object that, as Benjamin points out so astutely in the seventh thesis of his "On the Concept of History," was always carried along in triumphal processions and used to draw the powers of empathy into the service of the victors (*Selected Writings*; vol. 4 [Belknap–Harvard UP, 2003; print; 391])?

The tale of misleading quotations from Benjamin meanders away to grow as long as the pinnacles of his prose rise high. In her book on the demise of comparative literature, Gayatri Spivak cites a "lovely aside" Benjamin makes in his essay "Critique of Violence" to invest her way of teaching emancipation with a little of his weight (*Death of a Discipline* [Columbia UP, 2003; print; 33]). In its original context, the line notes the absence of any law in Germany restraining schoolteachers from battering their pupils. One might want to glance briefly into the ash and shadow surrounding the authority of a man who developed the concept of a "pure, divine violence" and whose criticism of Goethe's novel practiced a "sublime violence" in the name of God for the purpose of "shattering it into a thing of shards" ("Critique of Violence"; *Selected Writings*; vol. 1 [Belknap–Harvard UP, 1996; print; 252]). So far in history we have not seen any violence that is divine, even when it is just, and it may well be that we never shall. Extracting fragments from testimony to make a point contrary to the statement in which they appear is also a form of violence. We need, surely, to reflect on how far we should go with that, do we not?

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Why Do Research?

To the Editor:

The question "why do research?" echoes the title of Mark Edmundson's recent book *Why Teach? In Defense of a Real Education* (Bloomsbury USA, 2013; Nook file). Edmundson admirably advocates for an education that matters but is in short supply in the corporate university. Unfortunately, he repeats the cultural truism that "scholarly work . . . has precious little to do with the fundamentals of teaching" (54). In a review of *Why Teach?*, "How Four Years Can (and Should) Transform You," Michael S. Roth picks up this line of argument in opposing "esoteric research" to the real pedagogical work of higher education (*The New York Times*; New York Times, 20 Aug. 2013; Web; 17 Jan. 2014). However, for many gifted and committed teachers, research and teaching cannot and should not be separated. That's a lesson we should be professing to colleagues, administrators, and the general public. Interestingly, many of the students most invested in acquiring a real education rather than a résumé have already learned that lesson.

I was honored to receive a university-wide award for distinguished teaching the same year that my first book was published. The proximity of those two events was no coincidence. It's easy to see the connection between teaching and research when we teach upper-level, specialized courses in our areas of expertise—that is, when our research directly feeds our teaching. Our ambitious research agendas enable us to answer seemingly random—and sometimes off-the-wall—questions with an impromptu mini-lecture, often complete with recommendations for further reading. Our scholarly pursuits provide an extra level of class preparation every day.

What's not so obvious is that many of us are empathetic but demanding writing teachers in first-year general education courses because we have ambitious research agendas. We regularly wrestle with difficult arguments and why they matter; we dance and battle with the written word; we revise and edit; we recast arguments so that they are sharper and clearer and take into account additional evidence. So we respect our young students' struggles with

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