

M A T T E R IN THE MARGINS

Gwendolyn Brooks at 100

Curated by Anna Chen

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Ellen and Nirmal Chatterjee Exhibition Gallery
The Rare Book & Manuscript Library

This exhibition showcases the literary archives of Gwendolyn E. Brooks (1917–2000), Illinois Poet Laureate and the first black winner of the Pulitzer Prize. A comprehensive collection measuring over two hundred and fifty linear feet, Brooks's papers include youthful poetry and prose, scrapbooks of pieces she published as a young woman, extensive correspondence with a significant roster of other writers, and manuscript drafts and proofs, especially after she left mainstream commercial publishing to produce her works with black-owned presses.

Gwendolyn Brooks was an inveterate note-taker and self-chronicler, and the collection is filled with Post-Its, hotel stationery, and other scraps of paper on which she recorded her daily life and current events. She sketched out future plans and recorded meaningful memories in the flyleaves of notebooks and on the backs of photographs, and she interrogated others' ideas and narratives in the margins of letters she received and books she read. Through these marginal jottings, Brooks destabilized the idea of finality: their presence transforms seemingly finished, self-contained documents into ongoing conversations and works in progress. The exhibition highlights the ways in which Brooks's annotations bring attention to the margin as a space that matters. Here, the poet worked out the process of becoming, raising important questions about completion, authority, self-fashioning, and memory.

This exhibition was on view at the Poetry Foundation in Chicago this summer. It returns to campus for our fall celebration of Gwendolyn Brooks's life and legacy.

SHAPING THE SELF

Gwendolyn Brooks began to keep notebooks when she was eleven years old. She often intermingled drafts of poetry and prose with lists of her future aspirations and past accomplishments. Brooks never stopped making lists. For decades, up until the month of her death, she recorded what she ate every day, often in small spiral notebooks, which appear throughout this exhibition. She kept these notebooks not only as a record of her lifestyle, but also as encouragement to point it in healthful directions. Additionally, at the back of almost every notebook, she jotted down fragments of poems, quotations from television shows, and her thoughts on current events. As a result, these notebooks are sites at which her lived and observed experiences began to be distilled into poetry.

REFLECTIONS

Gwendolyn Brooks savored her first publications, packaging evidence of her successes into hand-made, annotated scrapbooks. The resulting palimpsests visually represent the layers of work building up to, culminating in, and reflecting upon publication. In later years, she frequently returned to her earlier works, commenting on them from a more mature perspective: sometimes with good humor, and other times with ruthless candor.

MEMORY AND METADATA

Gwendolyn Brooks frequently annotated her papers to record the contexts in which they had been created. She wrote detailed notes on the backs of many of her photographs in order to retain the knowledge of the people and events they captured, and annotated scraps of writings to describe their genesis. Archivists call this information metadata, and this section explores Gwendolyn Brooks's archival impulse to document and preserve the circumstances of her life and work.

CHALLENGES AND CONFRONTATIONS

Gwendolyn Brooks often used the margins to challenge the authoritative voice of the “central” text. In the examples in this section, her marginal annotations turn the editorial eye, sometimes fiercely, back on the editor. Visually, too, Brooks's marginalia insist on being seen—surrounding, crowding, and even competing with the central text for the reader's attention. Her annotations demonstrate the ways in which marginalia can actively participate in both literary debate and social justice.

THE LAST WORD

Gwendolyn Brooks frequently used the margins to challenge or affirm writers who might never see her comments. Though her marginal critiques are always thoughtful, these particularly frank annotations offer, perhaps, a more transparent window into Brooks's thoughts. Her use of the margins in this way show how they can serve, satisfyingly, as a space and opportunity to have the last word.