WORKSHOP # 5

Concepts

from Italo Calvino, "Whom Do We Write For? or The Hypothetical Bookshelf, THE USES OF LITERATURE, Harcourt, Brace & company: New York, 1986.

"A book is written so that it can be put aside other books and take its place on a hypothetical bookshelf, expelling certain other volumes from their places or forcing them back into the second row, while demanding that certain others should be brought up to the front.... A writer's work is important to the extent that the ideal bookshelf on which he would like to be placed is still an improbable shelf, containing books that we do not usually put side by side, the juxtaposition of which can produce electric shocks, short circuits."

Reading a book is not an isolated or pure interaction between reader & author. Your reading is affected, even determined, by your experiences, the prior knowledge you bring to the book, by the other books you've read.

Likewise, books do not come out of vacuums; they are the product of a wealth of reading that has led to a new idea, a new synthesis, Reading books, and especially reading them to seminar and write, means being able to at least imagine the numerous sources from which a book sprang AND to look forward to the collective writing of a new book through conversation.

Reading to Write is seeking an understanding beyond the depth of one book. It means perceiving connections, disconnections, problems, and so on.

As you read more and more books, a bookshelf is built in your brain, not of all you have read, but of all you have valued, all the books that your memory has invented to store the new ideas you have developed that may or may not resemble what you have read.

Mapping, as opposed to linear outlines or lists or cliff-note summaries, is a way of representing an idea that more closely mirrors (metaphorically) the workings of the brain (and other complex systems), a system of interconnections of varying strength and function that work simultaneously, spontaneously, and organically.

To read is to create, recreate, and perform the text. Reading is a creative act, an imaginative act. Responding to what you've read is part of reading, if the goal is deep and complex knowing.

Bookshelf Brain

1.
On a large sheet of paper arrange the small squares representing each of the books we've read this quarter. Arrange them in a meaningful way. It's up to you to determine what sort of meaning, what sort of way. (It won't necessarily be easiest to put similar or related books *very* close together as you may need room around them to write about their similarities.)

2.
Begin mapping, or "mind-webbing," each book. Your goal is to draw out significant ideas from the books; next, make as many interesting connections between books as possible. Label all connections. Connection can be factual; for instance, if two books discuss "the effect of machines/technology on culture," that's a connection. Connections can be insightful or interpreted; for instance, if "authors take opposing stances toward recent environmentalist movements," that's a connection. Connections can be even more strongly opinion based; for instance, "these authors are dead wrong about Nature," that's a connection. You may want to distinguish the connections from one another by color, thickness, or some other visual means.

At this point, your paper might look something like this:
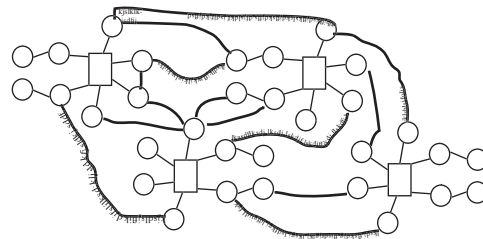
3.
Hypothetical book.
Examine your map. Identify focal points, "high traffic areas," and consider how well those focal points relate to each other. Identify concepts that are relatively unconnected or alone.
What's Missing?
Somewhere on your paper, add a blank square representing a book that doesn't exist yet. Make connections to the blank square first, then come up with a general subject for the hypothetical book. Please do not derive your hypothetical book from a book you know. If a book you know fits into the map somewhere, draw it in its own right and be creative with your invention.

4.
Elaborate.
Fold a large piece of paper in half and lay it in front of you like a book. This is a model for your hypothetical book.
Create:
Design the front cover, including a meaningful title, imagery, etc.
Design the back cover, including a summary, reviews from critics, other authors, etc.
On the inside, create a table of contents (be detailed, as in Technics & Civilization).
Notice the relationship between the non-linear thinking of the webbing and the linear thinking of the table of contents. One should not eliminate the other. If your table of contents feels very linear, be attentive to the kind of story you are telling. Present your hypothetical book.