

# On not wanting it to count: reading together as resistance<sup>1</sup>

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*Reading groups can be spaces of resistance, both from the competitive performances of some classroom seminars and from the calculative fields of neoliberalizing departments and universities. As graduate students, we offer this intervention as a consideration of the bodily politics of academic reproductions. In discussing the embodiment of textual practices in seminar and in reading groups, we point to monologue, 'trashing' criticism, and obscurity as practices habituated in the classroom seminar. We discuss how reading groups contest 'proper' knowledges, while enabling a multiplicity of textual, bodily practices. Finally, we consider how certain reading practices potentially de-stabilise neo-liberal subject formation in the academy. We discuss why we do not want reading groups to count, as a strategy for resisting accounting and accountable regimes in our departments and universities.*

**Key words:** North America, textual practice, radical pedagogy, reading group, seminar, bodily politics

## Introduction

First we must recognize our own roles in reproducing academic geography and the implications of our everyday practices. Seasoned academics should see graduate students and early-career faculty as agents for change, rather than instruments of reproduction, and encourage them to scrutinize established institutional practices and conventions. (Bauder 2006, 677)

Seated around a table, pages in hand, sentences underlined and paragraphs starred, reading for graduate students is both a solitary and collective practice. Within the graduate school experience in Canada and the United States, seminars are a primary site of formal geographic education: students come together to read and discuss texts under the direction of faculty. In some programmes, students are required to take only one seminar to fulfil their

course requirements. Other programmes may require three or four seminars each term. The number of students in seminars likewise varies, with enrolment numbers small (say three) to large (perhaps twenty-five). Coming together in these formal spaces of geographic education around the reading of texts is a banal practice of Geography. Similarly, informal, non-credited and voluntary spaces are created around reading by faculty and graduate students: reading groups. Here, we situate reading groups alongside seminars to question their bodily and gendered politics and call our practices into Geography's recent debates regarding the neoliberalisation of the academy.

Our goals in this essay are influenced by Harald Bauder's call to examine our everyday actions and challenge the reproduction of institutional practices. As Bauder notes in his essay, graduate students are positioned more vulnerably than tenured academics,

both in terms of the pressure to conform to academic norms and the structural limits to making change. We suggest our vulnerability allows for different ways of knowing and (necessitates) different ways of making change. We rely on our experience as graduate students at large research universities in Canada and the United States in order to examine the fault-lines produced around engaging with texts and the performances that constitute our academic identities. Textual practices are embodied practices: the act of reading is more than just a mindful experience. We act out/through our understandings of texts. For example, we speak about texts. We listen about texts. We emote about texts. In seminars and reading groups, how are we made vulnerable to each other through texts? If our academic identities are, in part, achieved over time through rituals of reading texts together, how do these identities come to matter? That is, how are they part of creating a learning community and academy that are sustainable of caring and responsible academicians?

We rely on the metaphor of fault-lines in this essay in order to examine our experiences in light of these questions. This metaphor allows us to imagine the friction and resulting fractures when expectations about academic reproduction collide into our embodied practices with texts. Examining these moments of collision, instability and slippage – where things break apart, slip away and fracture us – highlights the bodily politics of textual practice. Identifying these fault-lines is strategic. If our academic identities become naturalised over time in seemingly inescapable ways, then perhaps fault-lines indicate spaces where we can intervene. In what follows, we focus on three fracturing spaces: (1) classroom graduate seminars, (2) informal reading groups and (3) the ‘neoliberal’ academy. We offer that collective textual engagements can be acts of resistance to the calculative desires of neoliberalism.

Our reading of these fractures is framed by our own struggles in sorting out the tacit rules of seminar and the etiquettes that bound discussions of text within specific classrooms, institutions and national cultures of academic Geography. We suspect that our experience will resonate with others similarly situated and recognise that geographers in other academic contexts will experience different structures of seminar and collective textual practices as well as how these practices are gendered. This essay offers a set of vulnerabilities and resistances that will take differing forms elsewhere, but we hope they will be helpful in further exploration of if, where

and to what extent neoliberal values are practised in other academic cultures and how they might be resisted. In exploring reading groups as spaces of resistance, we do not mean to idealise them in opposition to seminars. Notably, certain seminars engage in feminist praxis and critical pedagogy, but these reading groups and seminars are different, and we speak to specific practices in each.

### The classroom seminar

While discussing our essay, one of us admitted that the space of the seminar is often constituted not with an engagement of the text or with each other but with an engagement of the self, an intellectual onanism: seminar often seems to be about the pleasure of hearing oneself speak rather than actively listening to others. Upon hearing this, the other was relieved. Someone else shared and was sometimes guilty of that seminar experience. As bell hooks (1994) writes, premising the classroom as a collective activity is crucial for the possibility of a passionate and inclusive learning community. We suggest that intellectual onanism, while serving some purpose in learning, most often works against this imagined collective classroom. Below, we expand on our experience of seminar in order to situate the possibilities of reading together.

We enter the classroom seminar, materially and discursively, as the first fracture of graduate student practice. Our anxieties as graduate students become flesh in these spaces; our comportment, attitude and efficacy are all overdetermined by the structures of seminar: the concert of tables, chairs, our peers, the instructor, the syllabus and the desire for a good evaluation. Preparation for seminar is an exercise in arrangement: both arranging one’s body around a table (often decided through strategy, to be near to/far from peers, instructors, etc.) and arranging one’s texts, notes and marginalia. We prepare our thoughts. The seminar usually begins with a prompt from the instructor or chosen facilitator. This field of engagement works towards fixity, as our classroom roles and arrangements become difficult to act within as well as without. The field is often enabled by the performance of the monologue: to be seated at or to become the ‘head’ of the table. A seminar monologue is a speech that touts one’s knowledge without enrolling the classroom discussion. We imagine monologues as intellectual tower-building – a vertical expression of what someone already knows, disconnected and distanced from the field of

engagement. Toril Moi (2005) suggests a gendering of such monologic activity, where 'alpha-males – so-called 'theory boys' – are encouraged to hold forth in impossibly obscure language, but where their own interventions elicit no response'.<sup>2</sup> Monologues also speak to the regulation of panic. As individual members present in seminar, our thoughts tend to the preparation of our next evaluated contribution rather than listening to our peers; tensions build. Sometimes we secretly cheer-on the monologue as a release of silent pressure building in the classroom. What becomes expressed is hurried and harried, and it operates less as a reflection on the state of discussion and more as a state of mind. If, as Nicholas Blomley states, 'academics are rewarded for their ability to create solitary and unique bundles of knowledge' (2002, 150), then we suggest that the seminar, as a series of these disconnected monologues, is a space for the embodiment of individualised claims to knowledge.

Our seminar arrangements also prepare for an uneasy silencing: the arranging of our more quiet peers out of the 'line of sight' of the instructor or their taking seats in what may become read as the margins of the table. Certainly, some peers will speak more and others less, but discerning kinds of silences is a challenge. Iain Chambers, writing in regards to language in the context of post-coloniality, poses that 'sometimes we fail to hear and merely register a silence' (1998, 51). Seminar instructors and classmates notice, to varying degrees, silences and body language. Moreover, Chambers, drawing on Kamala Visweswaran's research, writes that silence serves to mark agency, to protest rhetoric, and can be particularly powerful for women. We wonder how often students are silent in protest of seminar practices and are penalised on evaluations for participating 'less' when his/her silence spoke volumes. The seminar's requisite evaluations enable these kinds of calculative gazes. There are pedagogical strategies that work to recover voices in the classroom to meet these standards of productivity (see Hopkins 2006); for instance, Ian Cook uses journal-writing techniques to ground 'abstract academic debates' (undated, 44), providing undergraduate students with a sense of efficacy, challenging traditional notions of contribution, and creating new metrics by doing so.

There has been a limited literature on graduate seminar in Geography, especially from the perspective of graduate students. In the 1970s, during the same time that radical geography was making its

foundations, thoughts on seminar began to appear in the geographic literature (for example, McNee 1971; Sauer 1976).<sup>3</sup> Robert McNee makes the point that the 'primary purpose of the seminar is behavioral – it seeks to modify student behavior, specifically to develop professionalism in the student' (1971, 520). If this is true (as more recently suggested by Roberts 2000; Blomley 2002; Bauder 2006), then seminar works to delineate the roles and bodies deemed appropriate for knowledge production, both in the classroom as a student and longer term over a career. Outside of the discipline and alongside emerging work in radical pedagogy, in 1974, Michael Kahn, a psychology professor, problematised seminar practices in an essay called 'The Seminar'. This essay is still circulated and discussed broadly in academia.<sup>4</sup> Kahn sketches four types of seminars:<sup>5</sup> the free-for-all, the beauty contest, the home tour and the barn-raising. The free-for-all is a seminar where 'anything goes'; members are motivated to demonstrate their superior ability to gain the attention/approval of others. The beauty contest consists of a procession of individual contributions where all are admired. The home tour allows for the exhibition of a contribution while classmates explore the contribution, asking useful questions, but do not synthesise ideas. Finally, there is the 'all-American' barn-raising: classmates collaboratively construct a set of ideas as a community working together. The first three types of seminars figure decreasing degrees of intellectual onanism, and the final remains for Kahn to be the heralded moments of seminar.

What seminar practices demolish the building of community, and how do we come to habituate these negative practices in the seminar? For Kahn, one practice is the deceptive 'socratease', 'the asking of friendly questions, which show holes in a person's ideas'. Like the 'socratease', monologues can serve as means to critique on unfriendly terms. Given the obscure language monologues often practiced, those being critiqued may be unsure if they are being 'put down' or are able to defend themselves with similar rhetorical strategies.<sup>6</sup> In our seminar experiences, 'socrateasing' and other strategies citing weakness position one's knowledge as 'superior' and, hence, might yield in a better evaluation. We habituate this criticism and negation of others' contributions, what Geraldine Pratt (1996) refers to as 'trashing', in part because this is easier than caring critique and careful listening. Perhaps 'trashing' our classmates relates with how we learn to engage with texts. A

common tactic of textual critique is citing weakness. Usually, the text's author is not sitting at the seminar table, and, therefore, the bodily impacts of trashing are obscured. Whether or not 'the author is dead' is debatable, but when s/he is a bodied guest in our classroom, we have noticed a shift in critique. The kinds of critiques we are willing to voice as students in front of the authority on the text are often more careful/caring. We ask different questions of ourselves, our classmates, the author and the text. Ordinarily, however, the author of the text is not sitting with us, and our critiques of text may trash, just as we may trash our bodied classmates. Deborah Tannen (2002) refers to similar rituals of larger academic discourse: the practised exposure of the negative, the sneering at methodological frameworks and the fundamental move to show someone else is wrong. She exposes 'the ideology of agonism' that is made ritual in the academy and argues that this ritual is posited as professional and not personal. However, Tannen suggests that rarely is this how it feels. Since the seminar classroom is a space that disciplines us to perform certain kinds of professionalism, the similarities between the classroom and, more broadly, the academy give us pause.

### Reading groups

Since seminar is a primary means of disciplining intellectual etiquette, rituals pervading its discussion of texts can be a challenge to slip away from; however, reading groups can allow a shift from the structures of seminar practice. We clamour for different ways of reading together that take us (in some instances) away from the formal spaces of the University and the experiences that constitute them. Our reading groups, in part, have come together in opposition to seminar practices. In contrast to seminars, these voluntary spaces have a high degree of flexibility: how often we meet, when we meet, what we read, how much we read and with whom we share the readings. Here, we generalise two slippages made possible by reading groups: reconsideration of 'proper' knowledge and a different embodiment of knowledge-making.

Reading groups challenge what is understood as 'proper' knowledge. In our reading group experience, wanting to know and realising that we are often 'wrong' about knowing seems to premise our presence there. We rely on the term 'wrong' in scare-quotes to offer it as an incomplete understanding of a text and also that 'right' and 'wrong' in a learning envi-

ronment slip onto moral grounds. In seminar we try to be 'right', a position that simultaneously places us as both smart (with a high evaluation) and above (on higher moral ground). In reading groups, these moral grounds are flattened, and we make ourselves open to being 'wrong' as a component in re-making knowledge. 'Proper' knowledge is further re-cast in the confessions of the limits of our knowledge and our searches for knowing. For example, when reading a complex philosophical essay, one member of a reading group used Wikipedia to provide a resource for discussion. These kinds of informalised (sometimes inaccurate) sourcings foreground the multiplicity of approaches to learning and enables the discussion of a text to begin from somewhere. There is little shame in offering these starting points because it's okay to be 'wrong'. More specifically, reading groups allow a comfort around admitting little or no knowledge of certain terminologies or concepts. Showcasing one's comprehension, for example, through a monologue, is not in the stakes in our groups; rather, the survival of our reading groups is at stake since the fracturing practices of 'theory boys' and 'trashing' can lead to poor attendance and the demise of the group. Our reading groups' vulnerabilities necessitate active resistance to these practices.

One strategy of textual practice in our reading groups is slippage: between knowing and wanting-to-know, between the personal and the text, as well as sliding between theoretical framings. We recognise that the discussion in reading groups travels from connecting personal or departmental experience to the reading. The easy flow from one discussion to another is not marked as a tangent but instead becomes integrated into an intellectual and shared discussion. That reading groups take part outside of departmental spaces coincides with the slippage between personal and professional discussion. In the case of one of our reading groups, the group chooses to meet at a locally owned café that serves a primary site of political/queer activism in the city. In another reading group, each week one attendee is not yet old enough to read. The presence of a reading group member's child is an inclusion that the structured space of 'proper' seminars would not enable and further blurs the lines between personal and professional. In this way, our texts, our reading group practices and the location of the reading group collude in a reconsideration of 'proper' knowledge – to counter accepted claims to knowledge, to advocate different points of view and to offer new spaces for knowledge-making.

Reading groups foreground this knowledge-making as a bodily practice. We take seriously Donna Haraway's (1997, 99) insistence that knowledge is 'made', not 'made-up' and render visible our knowledge-making endeavours in reading group. hooks maintains that one of the 'central tenets of feminist critical pedagogy has been the insistence on not engaging the mind/body split' (1994, 194). Textual practice that is made is, likewise, embodied. We find reading groups exciting for a certain togetherness around reading, enabled through these moments that challenge the opaqueness of knowledge-making. Additionally, our reading groups practice reading aloud, moments where embodiment is pronounced or immanent. We read to each other, performing the text. Our voicings of texts become the focus, and it is the physiological act of listening that connects us with our peers and their readings. We listen without the anxiety of preparing for an evaluated vocal contribution. Also common practices at our reading groups are sincere questionings. These questions are not rhetorical but seek to elicit exchange, and the act of asking is premised on the possibility that others embody knowledge that partially can be shared. Listening and asking, in this way, is physically/emotionally/politically resistant to the calculative gazes of the classroom seminar and elides evaluative metrics.

While we enter reading groups to extend learning to supportive spaces outside the seminar, we recognise that reading groups like seminars can exclude and further the unspoken markings of student bodies untranscendable within the University and elsewhere. The number of reading group members is kept minimal, the spaces intimate. Meeting off-campus and in the evenings can limit who attends. We choose certain readings and certain members. The hierarchies of knowledge partially produced in seminar may be reproduced in reading groups; faculty members and senior graduate students may be the bodies that are pointed to as the source of knowledge, but, yet again, those hierarchies are challenged within these reading spaces. Reading groups may reproduce the gendered and racial lines made evident within our discipline and, in some cases, do so while members read together about gender and race in Geography. Mariana Ortega (2006) describes white feminists who theorise about women of colour as 'knowingly, lovingly ignorant'. Anti-racist agendas, she suggests, often mask white privilege. We suggest that this friction between the privilege of whiteness and the hopes of inclusion are a point of fracture in our reading groups. For the majority of reading groups in which

we personally have taken part, all members identify as white. Following Minelle Mahtani's (2006) strategies for anti-racist Geography, the remedy is not just committing to more 'diverse' group members. We (the authors, who are culpable of this) need to interrogate how our reading groups are sites of fracture, yielding spaces that reproduce systematic racism and, therefore, forfeit the opportunity for hooks' imagined collective classroom. At the same time, and along another axis of difference, one of our reading groups actively draws upon the radicality of difference<sup>7</sup> as means of membership: all reading group members are women. The flexibility of reading groups and their slippage with seminars points us to frame these learning spaces as contestations of the neoliberal academy. In strategic ways, we do not want reading groups to 'count'.

### **Neoliberalising academy**

As the third fracture of graduate student practice developed here, we seek to consider reading groups as a strategy of resistance to the calculative desires within seminar and to discuss these practices as indicative of broader shifts in the academy. Geography's engagement with the neo-liberalisation of the academy has brought to the fore how our disciplinary practices come to discipline us as neo-liberal subjects. Our professional activities, ranging from research assessment to publishing practices to our classrooms, are sited as spaces where neo-liberal values are enacted, reinforced, embodied and, in some instances, challenged (for example, see Castree 2006; ACME Editorial Collective 2007; Heyman 2000). The debates around classroom pedagogy within current governing technologies have taken place through discussions like those headed by Patricia Ehrkamp and Jenna Loyd at the 2006 Annual Meeting of the Association of American Geographers as well as scholarly contributions, such as from Noel Castree (2003), who articulates and politicises the connections between research and classroom pedagogy. Rich Heyman (2000) poses that the classroom is a site of political praxis that can challenge the corporatisation of the university. We propose reading groups as alternative spaces of political praxis, as sites which constitute subjects differently through their learning practices. Considering our experience where 'not counting' was a motivating factor to these reading groups, we describe how modes of subject formation are enabled by the classroom seminar, and then discuss how 'not counting' works as a strategy of resistance.

Carl Sauer states that

We have gone too far in setting up seminars as properties of individual professors and in passing the students around from colleague to colleague. Since we are talking of things as they should be, the parenthetic remark is permissible that better seminars require administrative relaxation of 'required teaching loads' as well as of 'study credits'. (1976, 77)

The matter of how seminars count is an issue of historical debate in Geography, especially given that Sauer's statement was first written in 1948. His comment, among other things, brims with rhetoric of individuation, property and credit. These characterisations, if made today, would perhaps be construed as contesting neo-liberal values. Wendy Brown casts these values in scalar relation:

neo-liberalism carries a social analysis which, when deployed as a form of governmentality, reaches from the soul of the citizen-subject to education policy to practices of empire. (2003)

Lawrence Berg (2006), in contesting 'neo-liberal spaces of audit', situates the self, the curriculum vitae, the academy and audit culture; he offers that we as geographers well-versed in liberal practice are prone to taking on the valuing of individualism on neo-liberal terms. He cites the 'combination of innate ability, hard work, perseverance, and a host of other positive or meritorious personal characteristics' that come to script our individuated successes (2006, 765). Given increasing restraints in funding, rising tuition and the 'meritocracy' of the academy, the winning of awards and scholarships by graduate students is both a means of academic success and bodily survival. The stakes are high and real. In this context, seminars become an institutionalised and naturalised survival of the fittest. We compete to receive the highest mark, to be seen as the most intelligent, to be ranked at the top when it comes time for the behind-closed-doors funding discussions. The monologic strategies of seminarising, as described above, are not the outcome of neo-liberalisation; seminar monologues are embodied practices that slip into market principles. By putting intellectual onanism in conversation with penetration of market values in the academy, it seems there is slippage between the individuation of knowledge production in seminars and the individuation of our course evaluations. Monologues have the potential to be the sole/soul currency of seminarising.

Reading groups don't 'count'. They are not the currency of graduate school and, yet, their value has meant so much for our two intellectual lives. A reading group does not count (for much) on one's curriculum vitae.<sup>8</sup> There is no final evaluation. Who is 'in charge' of a reading group may be quite fluid. Responsibility for choosing the readings, email coordination and meeting times are diffuse. While there is a sense of a need to come to reading group regularly to maintain a rhythm and comfort with each other, missing a meeting is not a big deal. No one's counting. With limited counting mechanisms and a collective responsibility, reading groups make friction with audit cultures' mandates. This diffuse arrangement of responsibility is paralleled by the diffuse manner of knowledge production. In seminars the process-cum-goal can be individuation, but in a reading group the goal of working through a text is collective embodiment. This embodied strategy follows from Heyman's call for 'deobjectifying knowledge in the classroom, thus breaching the walls that have been artificially erected between theory and practice' (2000, 302). Incidentally, reading group strategies coincide with how collegiality has been posed as a strategy of resistance to neo-liberal engagement. Reading groups maintain points of intersection with collegiality: autonomous practices, multiple voices in decision-making, and the ease of communicating ideas (following Bessant 1995 as cited in Berg and Roche 1997). There have been calls by some reading group members to make the group 'count' for institutional credit on our transcripts, but we and other reading members have insisted that reading groups don't count within the institutionalised matrices.<sup>9</sup> That we recognise the uncountable ways that reading groups have meaning becomes our hope in a practice that is productive of alternative learning spaces, strengthening collective means of learning and of alternative academic futures.

## Conclusion

We enter this intervention as a response to Harald Bauder's (2006, 677) call to recognise our everyday practices that constitute academic geography; as graduate students, we are quite vulnerable and yet are 'important potential agents in the transformation of the academic field.' We consider alternative spaces of learning – such as reading groups – as crucial, resistive spaces. These reading groups address what we often found missing in classroom seminars: collective (mis)readings. We point to the monologue,

unheard silences and ‘trashing’ criticism as (de)VICES habituated in the classroom seminar. Our experiences as graduate students have shown that reading groups can emerge as alternatives to these seminar spaces, allowing for explorations of topics unavailable in seminar and enabling a togetherness around the text. We discussed how reading groups contest ‘proper’ knowledges, while enabling a multiplicity of textual, bodily practices. Further, we conceptualised certain reading practices as potentially de-stabilising neo-liberal subject formation in the academy; we re-positioned reading groups as alternative learning spaces which resist accounting and accountable regimes in our departments and universities. In this sense, we do not want reading groups to count; their currency we insist to remain unexchangeable.

We conclude by asking of ourselves and our readers to continue thoughtful pedagogical practices, to be explicit with each other about our pedagogical goals. What difference might it make if, from the beginning of our (under)graduate experience, we were made cognisant of the kinds of academic subjecthood we were making? What if we were explicitly engaged in a language that enabled us to talk about it?

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### Notes

- 1 To those who are counting, note that both authors have contributed equally to this intervention.
- 2 Moi also offers that there are theory boys and theory girls. This concept of theory boys stemmed from conversations of women graduate students who expressed their marginalisation through gendered seminar practices.
- 3 Although, the *Journal of Geography in Higher Education* and the *Journal of Geography* are primary resources for pedagogy, pedagogy in geography is argued to remain peripheral to geographic discussion (Heyman 2000), and Noel Castree (2003) suggests that these journals speak more to the technical than to the philosophy of teaching.
- 4 Professor Susan Roberts, for example, uses Kahn’s essay in her graduate seminars at the University of Kentucky to explicitly engage students in how one might productively contribute to seminar.
- 5 Please note Kahn’s gendering of seminar types.
- 6 Thanks to Sarah Brown and Katherine McCallum for pointing out the uncertainty of being intellectually slayed.
- 7 Thanks to Lawrence Santiago for pointing out the importance of making claim to the radicality of difference.
- 8 Ironically, the slipperiness of audit culture allows us to count reading groups on our CVs even if we don’t receive institutional credit. Co-organising reading groups potentially counts as a service activity. However, as Susan Hanson (2007) describes, service activities can subvert the academic mantra, wherein research and teaching are ordered before service activities that sustain a healthier academic life.
- 9 We admit that our comfort in not having ‘extracurriculars’ like this count lies, in part, to our status of post-exams, where our reliance on institutional credit has waned.

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