



Feminist Reading Together in a Different Register

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ABSTRACT *In this paper we reflect upon our multi-year reading group as a site of decolonial feminist praxis that motivates reading in a different register from how we were trained to read as academics in the humanities. In collaborative study we willingly open ourselves to change, to being worked on by one another and by the texts we read. Our reading together has initiated the undoing of settler colonial academic subjectivity and the co-creation of new forms of scholarly subjectivity grounded in relations of care, openness to transformation, and a growing commitment to epistemic justice. In giving an account of our group history and process we reflect on our complicities with settler-colonialism in the university and consider the ways that reading together has cultivated our capacities to listen to counter-narratives, formulate institutional and self critique, and engage in epistemic reparations.*

KEYWORDS complicity; reckoning; academic subjectivity; epistemic injustice; decolonial; collectivity; feminism; settler colonialism; patriarchy; racism; open normativities

Introduction

We have been reading feminist texts together for more than two years as part of an ongoing reading group.² In this paper, three members of the group give

¹ Work on this essay was shared equally; authors' names appear in alphabetical order.

² The authors we have read include, but are not limited to, Sara Ahmed, Gloria Anzaldúa, Patricia Hill Collins, Katherine McKittrick, José Medina, la paperson, Imani Perry, Alexis Shotwell, Françoise Vergès, Kathi Weeks, El Jones, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, Robyn Maynard, and Sylvia Wynter. Members of the reading group from January 2020 to the present include Mariana

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an account of our collective reading practice as a form of feminist decolonial humanities enquiry that engages us in reckoning with our present and past complicities with settler colonial institutions (Nath & Allen, 2022) and in humble exploration of different and more generative futures. As a feminist decolonial practice, our reading together initiates and sustains transformations of our values, ways of knowing and relating, and our social imaginary. We understand decolonial gestures as those that resist, critique, and contest the colonialism of Western thought (Maldonado-Torres, 2011) as the only option and that intervene in the “disciplinary management of knowledge,” “systems of belief,” and “systems of ideas” (Walsh & Mignolo, 2018). As we see the decolonial as operating in the domains of the epistemic and the imaginary, we distinguish it from decolonization which, Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang (2012) so carefully explain, “requires the repatriation of Indigenous land and life” (p. 21). In making this distinction, however, we acknowledge that while we aspire to contribute to decolonizing settler colonial institutions, we remain accountable to the fact that our decolonial efforts are insufficient and potentially inadequate to the work of decolonization.

Our reading is grounded in relations of care, shared meaning making, and a commitment to enact such praxis in our teaching and other relations. In reading together, we collectively resist both the individualizing conception of humanities scholarship that sees studying, thinking, and writing as activities done alone and away from others as well as the valorizing of disciplinary expertise that curtails meaningful engagements and listening to counter-narratives. In reading and thinking together we engage in a form of collaborative study without pre-determined purpose or institutional reward. We three believe that in resisting the call to instrumentalize our activities through conventional scholarly outputs we have been able to cultivate the capacity of becoming and remaining open to being worked on by one another and by the texts we read. This has been a generative practice in that it has enabled us, collectively and as relational beings, to begin the work of undoing (McCullagh, 2021) our own settler colonial academic subjectivities along with their concomitant desires, habits, and behaviours that obstruct the proliferation of alternative ways of being and relating. In emphasizing relations of care and compassion across disciplines we collectively generate movement away from hidebound disciplinary expertise and towards practices of study grounded in humility and receptive listening where we cultivate decolonial feminist senses and ethical orientations. Within and beyond our respective disciplines of academic practice we have sought out collaborative engagement, examples of which we share in what follows to illustrate specific claims. Before beginning, it is important to make plain our subject positions.

Michelle (she/her) is a queer, white, settler teacher-educator, born and working in Kijipuktuk (Halifax, NS), the great or main harbour, in Mi’kma’ki,

Prandini Assis, Michelle Forrest, Columba Gonzalez, Angela Henderson, Renee Jackson, Mikaela Luttrell-Rowland, Lindsey MacCallum, Suzanne McCullagh, Renée McKinstry, Maki Motapanyane, Ian Reilly, Ellen Shaffner, Scott Stoneman, and Sepideh Zabeti.

the stolen ancestral territory of the Mi'kmaq, People of the Dawn. The working class struggles of her mother of Highland Scottish ancestry and her Acadian father made possible her entry into higher education and the world of privilege she now inhabits. They moved from their rural roots, in Cape Breton and les Îles de la Madeleine respectively, and hid signs of their ancestry, such as their distinctive ways of speaking, in order to fit into the anglophone colonial system of a depression-era urban environment. Michelle has come to acknowledge that she internalized this imposed cultural inferiority, along with the homophobia endemic to the heteronormative society in which she grew up, and now works each day with Ahmed's (2019) insight that a "refusal to empty oneself of a history... can be an inheritance" (p. 207).

Suzanne (she/her) is a settler philosophy teacher and scholar, daughter to a seventh-generation settler working-class single mother of protestant Irish ancestry and first-generation South Indian Christian father, sister to a younger brother, friend, cat companion, and neighbour. She was born and works on the Haldimand Tract of the Grand River watershed, treaty lands and traditional territory of the Anishinaabe and the Haudenosaunee, and home to osprey and red winged black bird. The Haldimand tract is land granted by the British Crown to the Haudenosaunee (Six Nations) in 1784 as payment for their military support during the American Revolution. Contrary to the treaty, the land has been and continues to be dispossessed from the Six Nations through settlement and development with ongoing resistance, most recently in the form of 1492 Land Back Lane made up of Six Nations Land Defenders who mobilized and succeeded in stopping a housing development project by the town of Caledonia in Southern Ontario

Ian (he/him) is a white, cisgender male settler academic residing in K'jipuktuk, Mi'kma'ki, the unceded, unsundered territory of the Mi'kmaq people. He grew up in a suburb of Sudbury, Ontario (Atikameksheng Anishnawbek land), home to one of the longest-running mining operations in the world. Surrounded by family and neighbours who worked in schools, hospitals, and mines, Ian identified as belonging to a broader working-class community, but he certainly benefited from the privileges of a middle-class upbringing. The son of French-Canadian and Irish settler parents, Ian and his two older siblings were raised and educated in a French- and Irish- Catholic environment. The education they received in the French Catholic system (circa the 1980s/1990s) did not prepare them to know anything about the legacy of colonialism in Canada, nor did it offer any opportunities to learn about Canada's role in the expansion of settler capitalism (see Shipley, 2020).

Collaborative forms of reading can function as a set of social relations conducive to *study* against the grain of colonial academic work. Lingering in reckoning in order to come to understand the causes and consequences of our complicities in maintaining oppressive social and institutional status quos, we recount moments of recognizing our complicity in systemic coloniality and attempt to come to terms with the irony of being simultaneously complicit and

responsible for making substantive change. Reckoning with past as well as current epistemic ignorances (Medina, 2013), we find solace, nurturance, and challenge in reading and writing together en route to imagining and enacting alternative forms of scholarship (multi-media, cross-generational, intercultural) that suggest different relations between the activities of study and world making. For example, a prior work from the reading group (Assis et al., 2023), incorporates visual artwork into linear prose and the coauthors are early-, mid-, and late-career university faculty from Brazil, Mexico, U.S.A., and Canada. What regularly emerges in our conversations is how each of us as settler feminist academics is responding to the challenge of epistemological injustices personally and professionally: How and why do counter-narratives unsettle one's sense of self and way of life? What worlds does such unsettling make possible? How does reading, writing, discussing in a different register together change one's institutional commitments, pedagogy, and collegial and community relations? Giving ourselves over to the group, not as if driven or dictated by it, but as persons changing and developing in and with it, grows and renews our commitments to the decolonial work of reckoning with our complicities and repairing our epistemic insensitivities.

Our collective reading practice fosters what Alexis Shotwell (2016) calls "identifying *into* feminism" in moving "toward *new epistemologies, new ways of producing knowledge and transforming social relations*" (p. 171, emphasis in original). In suspending academic routine and rote ways of knowing and relating by devoting several hours weekly to preparing for and meeting informally online, our reading together fosters an experimental space of mutual pedagogy that values lived experience, vulnerability, and uncertainty which helps us undo our habits of striving to perform disciplinary or intellectual mastery. We have come to recognize that well-trodden forms of academic striving can have the effect of blocking capacities for compassion, care, and accountability by privileging individual instrumental productivity over, and oftentimes at the expense of, meaningful workplace relationality. For example, Michelle has come to see the irony in striving on her faculty union to protect collective rights while rarely having time to get to know colleagues personally. Our reading together has sparked difficult questions about our complicity with/in institutions, built on stolen Indigenous lands (paperson, 2017), that reproduce colonialism, racism, sexism and other social inequities rooted in hierarchical conceptions of being human, and extractivist logics that justify the destruction of lifeworlds for profit and productivity. As university professors we are implicated in the inequities perpetuated within our institutions that make public statements about their commitments to decolonization and anti-racism while simultaneously surveilling the research (Auger et al., 2023) and ignoring the extra labour our Indigenous, Black, and colleagues of colour have to take on within the institution (Dhamoon, 2020). Recognizing our complicity and implication does not absolve us of responsibility for the myriad ways that social injustice shows up in and is perpetuated by the institutions that sustain us

socially and materially; rather it calls upon us to take collective responsibility in fostering different futures (Rothberg, 2019).

Following Imani Perry's (2018) recommendation to think of feminism as a "critical reading practice in which one 'reads through these layers' of gendered forms of domination" (p. 9), we have endeavoured to read with more care; to read otherwise than we were taught and would be recognized for individually. As Lave and Wenger (1991) have pointed out, despite it being obvious that learning takes place in social situations, conventional theories of knowledge and pedagogy have not come to grips with what this means in teaching practice and in the workplace. Their theory of situated knowledge challenges conventional readings of the generalizability of knowledge, a problem with serious consequences for understanding concepts like "expert" and "tradition of practice." In what follows, we position our reading practice as an ongoing experiment in feminist reading as part of an iterative process of undoing forms of academic subjectivity grounded in strict disciplinary practice and cultivating feminist decolonial praxes in our relationships, study, and teaching (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018).

Group Orientations and Relations

Our reading together nurtures a shared space that makes possible a way of reading in a different register than the kind of reading we have been trained to do as academics. We began our reading together with the idea of a seminar structure, assuming someone needed to lead each meeting by posing questions. This quickly evolved into a looser dynamic, beginning with catching up on one another's lives, discussing the weather, etc., and allowing organic segues into the reading to occur in its own time as one of us eventually weaves connections to the text(s) we are reading. What other elements assemble us in a new way? First, there are the readings themselves, chosen specifically for being feminist and absent from, or marginalized across, our respective disciplinary canons. In addition to being feminist, several of the authors we read are thinkers who bring racism and colonialism into view as significant forces of oppression intersecting with hetero-patriarchal norms of gender, sexuality, and class. There was also the lived reality of our "unsettled" states of navigating the ever-unpredictable rhythms and demands exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Our collective reading took form in light of the conflict between pressures to perform as compliant neoliberal scholars and researchers during the global pandemic and the obligation to collectively reckon with and respond to ongoing legacies of racism and colonialism in Canada. Anti-Indigenous racism and colonialism in Canada became hyper-visible in the shock with which non-Indigenous Canadians responded to the 2021 recovery of unmarked children's graves at former residential schools as a "discovery" in spite of the fact that this was something Indigenous people knew and which was detailed in *The*

Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada that was made available in 2015: “Many, if not most, of the several thousand children who died in residential schools are likely to be buried in unmarked and untended graves. Subjected to institutionalized child neglect in life, they have been dishonoured in death” (Truth & Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015, p. 134). There was an overriding sensation that things were not going to be alright, that they hadn’t been alright, that there would not and ought not to be a “return to normal” (Lalonde, 2020; Roy, 2020), that going forward we needed to grapple with the ways we are invested in institutions that produce disabling conditions for many. As we continue to read together, what began as a *sense* has solidified into an *acknowledgement* that calls for us to respond.

bell hooks (1984) and Sara Ahmed (2017) argue that feminism requires sustained recognition of *what has not ended* – namely, sexism, sexual exploitation and oppression, racism, and colonialism. In as much as our reading group can be considered a milieu in which affective/emotional ties are being woven, it is useful to situate (our) group affect(s) as relational, as a set of “(re)actions or relations of ‘towardness’ or ‘awayness’” (Ahmed, 2014, p. 8) in relation to things or objects that may or may not stick. The objects of study at play refer to our shared readings, texts that summon a great deal of emotional labour, as they help us better understand our colonial complicities, and incite “affective forms of reorientation” (Ahmed, 2014, p. 8), such as avowing our inadequacies in facing the challenges of decolonization. As we argue below, the exercise of reading (and writing) together has engendered a commitment to stay with the troubles that have not ended and precipitated relations of *awayness* from undesirable investments in neoliberal higher education whose modes of operation, as Eve Tuck more fully enumerates, involve “trust in the free market... intense focus on the individual, distaste of collective action, high tolerance for unemployment, and blaming individuals for their oppression” that are “directly linked to the settler colonial structuring of our societies” (Tuck, 2018, p. 150). It has also generated momentum of *towardness* with respect to institutional critique and a reimagining of academic life and labour. These feminist pivots represent the ripening fruits of our emergent practice of reading together in a different register.

Weekly meetings dedicated to reading feminist theory and philosophy with others has taken precedence, however briefly, over other more highly valued and rewarded activities within the institution, such as publishing and securing external grants and funding. Although in the larger reading group we have published collaboratively before (Assis et al., 2023) and secured modest internal grants to hire a graduate student and support disseminating that work on open access, these results were not anyone’s motive for joining or continuing with the group. That publication and this one evolved as part of the praxis of what we do as academics: reflect on our process, inscribe the findings, and share them with others. We have been able to cultivate social and relational ties by countering the ever-present forces of competition, careerism, and antagonism within modern-day university life by emphasizing care,

reciprocity, and generosity. Our efforts to prioritize collective study resonate with movements of slow scholarship (Askins & Blazek, 2017; Berg & Seeber, 2016; Gill, 2017; Munge et al., 2021; Taylor, 2020), care collectives (Chatzidakis et al., 2020; Girvan et al., 2020), and feminist praxis that reorient ways of being in relation within or at the edges of the corporate university system. Our reading group has generated space that enables “a mode of thinking with others separate from the thinking that the institution requires of you” (Harney & Moten, 2013, p. 11) – a process akin to what Stefano Harney and Fred Moten (2013) have called “entering into study.” In *The Undercommons*, they argue that the conditions of academic labour have become, and continue to be, “unconducive to study” in that they “actually preclude or prevent study, mak[ing] study difficult if not impossible” (Harney & Moten, 2013, p. 113). If study exists as a kind of “speculative practice” (Harney & Moten, 2013, p. 110), as something that you do with other people (on par with talking, walking, or dancing), then collective reading can foster social relations that go against the grain of instrumental neoliberal academic work and foster conditions for “entering into study.” From the outset, the reading group was approached as a site of exploration and sociality grounded in the desire to read feminist works in a social context. And so, in reflecting on our collaborative process, we enter into studying ourselves and our colonial complicities.

Channeling Ahmed’s (2017) approach to reading feminist classics, entering into study means dedicating time to feminist thought (resources, concepts, words) and pausing. In resisting ever-present calls to rush ahead, we nurture “the possibility of opening our ears to what came before” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 17). We become capable of listening more openly. Our book lists are created in concert and tasks are shared across the group. It is this collectivity, we believe, that has nurtured the capacity of being open to being worked on by one another and by the texts we read. This openness generates multidirectional exchanges which propel us into new territories as well as return us to and complexify our thinking on recurrent themes and concerns, such as hierarchies of being within the institution and the inadequacy of our academic training. These shortcomings include lack of preparation for us to teach ethically, recognize our epistemological insensitivities, understand the meaning of feminisms, be open to liberatory politics, confront the problems and possibilities of realizing equity within institutions, and respond to calls for decolonization. Our engagement has been with thinkers questioning the harms of de-collectivisation, de-mobilization, and despair wrought by purity politics (Shotwell, 2016), the pervasiveness and myriad forms of patriarchy (Perry, 2018), the academic refusals of Black feminist standpoints (Hill Collins, 2009), the forces that perpetuate a Western homogenized version of being human as aspirational for all people (Wynter & McKittrick, 2015), the constitution of the subject in terms of productivist norms (Weeks, 2011), the structures and mechanisms by which institutional harms are repeated (Ahmed, 2021), the

limits and possibilities for decolonizing actions with(in) the university (paperson, 2017), the ways that insensitivity to one's epistemic limitations – meta ignorance – is an ethical failure that contributes to the perpetuation of social harms (Medina, 2013), and decolonial feminism as active resistance to racial capitalism (Vergès, 2021). Considering these challenges in light of the ways in which we were enculturated into the academy has helped us make space and develop strategies for questioning the forms and functioning of academic subjectivity that is allied to patriarchal, neoliberal institutions invested in maintaining an inequitable, hierarchal, and oppressive status quo. This organic back-and-forth through our collective reading has enabled us to resist the atomization of academic labour, to be in community, and to develop a shared “feminist ear” (Ahmed, 2017, pp. 202-203; 2021, pp. 3-7), the capacity to hear and to witness (Perry, 2018) differently situated others within the group, the institution, and society more broadly. As Katherine McKittrick (2021) puts it, “listening changes the text” (p. 69).

Members of the larger reading group, to which we three belong, come from different disciplines (communication studies, cultural studies, design, library science, literature, management, philosophy, political science, art education) and one of the defining dynamics of the group remains that no one has claimed expertise or expert standing in our feminist field(s) of study. Our eschewal of expertise in approaching these feminist texts has fostered an environment of trust, respect, and vulnerability in which group members can misread or misunderstand without fear of rebuke or reprisal; risk-taking, critical questioning, and generosity are encouraged. Such a space creates room for us to respect one another's intellectual capacities and limitations while challenging one another to think beyond perspectival limits and epistemic insensitivities. Learning to read in a different register through weekly exchanges has stimulated respect, openness, and compassion for the readings, and for one another's interpretations, life experiences, and ways of seeing; it has directed our attention to the ways that our thinking, teaching, desires, and consciousness have been shaped by our long disciplining time in the university system. As McKittrick (2021) reminds us, the dense texts and uncomfortable ideas we often grapple with have the capacity to wear us out but cultivating humility and solidarity in study can be regenerative and inspire action towards epistemic and social reparation.

Deciphering Group Process

Sylvia Wynter provides a nuanced account of how colonial behaviours (and through them institutions) are maintained and perpetuated. Her notion of being human as praxis (as verb and not noun) articulates the complex entanglement of the biological with the symbolic or narrative (mythoi) by way of the opiate reward system which operates neuro-chemically within individuals but which is socio-culturally constituted (Wynter & McKittrick, 2015). When an

individual subject mimetically performs according to the selected model of behavior circulating in the dominant mythoi then they will experience a neurochemical reward; similarly, if an individual fails to perform in this way they are likely to experience a neurochemical punishment. Undoing our attachments to colonial institutions is not just a matter of becoming conscious of other ways of acting and being, it's a matter of fostering mythoi that generate different neurochemical pathways to overwrite the opiate reward system that corresponds to colonial mythoi. How has our academic training and the conditions of our academic labour constituted us neuro-chemically? What is the opiate reward and punishment system operative within academia and how does this system work to undermine the conditions necessary for epistemic, ethical, and political responsibility? And, in what ways does our collective reading practice prepare the ground for the generation of alternative myths and narratives about what study is and what it means to be a scholar?

Kathi Weeks' (2011) analysis of the way the protestant work ethic constitutes individuals is helpful for thinking through how we as academic subjects have been constituted as well as some of the ethical and political problems associated with such constitutions:

The effect, moreover, is not just to shape the individual's beliefs and values but to promote the individual's constitution in relation to and identification with productivist norms... The ethic's mandate is not merely to induce a set of beliefs or instigate a series of acts but also to produce a self that strives continually toward those beliefs and acts. This involves the cultivation of habits, the internalization of routines, the incitement of desires, and the adjustment of hopes, all to guarantee a subject's adequacy to the lifetime demands of work. (Weeks, 2011, p. 54)

Just as the protestant ethic shapes individuals in terms of their beliefs and values to identify with productivist norms, academe has shaped the beliefs and values of academic subjects to identify with a specific set of productivist norms, namely: the notion that every scholarly effort must necessarily end in a peer-reviewed publication, that as academics we must display disciplinary mastery, intra and interdisciplinary hierarchy, and epistemological oppression and exclusion.

This is what Harney and Moten's (2013) praxis of "entering into study" has the capacity to subvert. The incitement towards sociality serves to make space for the cultivation of habits of study which differ from the habits and desires of the dominant form of academic work. Our collective reading praxis fosters conditions for the undoing of dominant forms of academic subjectivity and the growth of new relations to ourselves, each other, our students, and our communities (scholarly and otherwise). Entering into study in a social and self-reflexive space has brought about a "rubbing off [on] one another, [a] brushing against one another" that has sharpened our collective orientation towards "trying to figure out some kind of ethically responsible way to be in [the] world" (Harney & Moten, 2013, p. 108).

Wynter's (1992) key question – how are human subjects “instituted as specific modes of the sociogenic subject by the signifying practices of each culture’s order of discourse” (p. 269)? – turns on her rejection of ontocentrism. If the human does not pre-exist the complex of signifying and discursive practices instituting each subject and mode of being, then usual senses of purpose do not apply. Intending to create or interact with artifacts, organisms, or objects of aesthetic/compositional appreciation (our group discourse constituting “object” for deciphering), marks an *ontocentric* way of acting in the world, insofar as intentions are assumed to be *under* self control and outcomes believed to be their *inevitable* result. If subjects are sociogenic – constituted through their culture’s signifying practices – it is presumptuous to intend to produce self-controlled effects. John Cage put the question of purposefulness this way: “we are not moving toward a goal, but are, so to speak, at the goal constantly and changing with it” (Kirby & Schechner, 1965, p. 60). Recognizing the “non-intentional unstructured direction” (Kirby & Schechner, 1965, p. 57) in daily life, he chose to provoke change by evading his own intentions and mobilizing chance as methodology, thereby avoiding purity, which he considered unachievable. Cage unsettled the ontocentric grounds for reflective/aesthetic judgment:

When we say “purposelessness” we add “purposeful purposelessness.” You’ll find this more and more being recognized not as double talk, but as truth. That’s why I don’t like definition; when you succeed in defining and cutting things off from something, you thereby take the life out of it. It isn’t any longer as true as it was when it was incapable of being defined. (Kirby & Schechner, 1965, p. 70)

Orthodoxy of definition and the desire for classificatory purity is what Shotwell (2016) takes to be the basis of exclusionary concepts such as disability, racialization, sexuality, and so-called “abnormal” (p. 26) excess, that limit social relations. Over-generalizing from colonies of microbes to colonies of people to “manage the abnormal” is how “classification shapes settler and Indigenous lives” (Shotwell, 2016, p. 28).

Coming together serendipitously as we did through a shared sensibility that something was missing in practice from the institutional and discipline-specific supports on offer within the university, our slow reading, talking, and sharing created a sustaining dynamic, despite our divergent expectations and usual ways of working. As in Cage’s sense of purpose, our process has us “at the goal constantly and changing with it” (Kirby & Schechner, 1965, p. 60). The experience constitutes reading in a different register. Like the soprano singing in the tenor register, or bass singing alto, switching registers changes how voices blend their personal colour and timbre in the harmonic whole. Reading in a different register offers new insight into institutional critique, as it applies to academic subjectivity, its rituals and structures of desire. Authors beyond the canons of our disciplines conceptualize what a reconstructed forum for academic life might look like, which provokes group relations of “towardness” (e.g., towards each other as persons and towards novel ways of relating) and

“awayness” (e.g., away from disciplinary practices as usual) to which Ahmed (2014, p. 8) refers. Taking to heart Wynter’s (1992) claim that the subject is sociogenic, each of our engrained patterns of academic exchange is prompted into flux across our respective disciplines, thereby forging a new order of discourse through collaboration.

In reading against the grain of canonicity, we continually share personal stories of what is going on in our lives; how each of us balances institutional “biocentric methods and methodologies that can only produce dehumanizing mathematical results” (McKittrick, 2021, p. 111) with a belief that “sharing stories *is* rigorous radical theory” (McKittrick, 2021, p. 73, emphasis in original). Our reading together privileges experiential and auto-biographical realms as legitimate sources of insight and illumination. New questions emerge as we support one another in our stories and proposed strategies for struggle against the neoliberal university and against dominant social and political imaginaries of the settler colonial state. Collaborating provides a unique social context of similarly committed persons implicated in and resistant to corporatized institutional cultures that perpetuate sexism, racism, ableism, and colonialism.

What regularly emerges in our conversations is how each of us settler colonial feminist academics responds to the call for epistemic justice personally (i.e., how and why world affairs unsettle me and my ways of life) and professionally (i.e., how reading, writing, discussing in a different register incite me to change my curricula, teaching, and institutional commitments). Reading together is socio-environmentally effective insofar as our group process provides us with intellectual, ethical, and social support in our struggles to bring about change within our respective academic workplaces. If we aren’t able to influence the elaboration of more just labour (and social) relations within these universities, what chance is there for us to contribute to decolonizing the institution as a whole? United loosely in terms of the relaxed nature of meetings and the open ways in which we are free to come and go as other commitments arise, we continually correlate and recalibrate typical orthodox signifying practices with our shifting status-orienting processes whenever we describe who, why, when, and how we function as persons and as a group. This amounts to a steady flow of exchange that continually punctuates our interactions in working to build consensus about a given idea and recognize that a line of thought or writing is generating new ideas or connecting to previous inquiries of communal concern.

Role-allocation in the group is distributed *in situ* as we proceed to a new text, project, or problem that is group-related or affects one of our members. When a personal problem is shared, we support and suggest alternative ways of thinking about or acting in response to it, in the manner of supportive working colleagues and friends. For more conventionally formal aspects of our work together, such as preparing this article or a book manuscript, each contributes according to their capacities at that moment and, should these be depleted

before a task is complete, we deliberate over how best to redistribute roles such that trust and camaraderie in the group take precedence over external constraints such as submission or grant application deadlines and shifting workloads. These arrangements are never predetermined via a codified set of rules. Our dynamic develops organically as a result of our commitments to cultivating care, compassion, respect, and appreciation for each person's capacities and limitations regarding their institution's expectations for them to perform according to predetermined norms. Sharing feminist reading of non-canonical texts, we *become* a non-canonical text that reads itself in a different register. Deciphering our signifying processes reveals, doubles-back, and renews an emerging shared vocabulary even as we try and rest content to fall short of pinning down definitive purposes. By valuing the quality of group engagement as necessary ground, we effect purposeful purposelessness as our *modi operandi*. This moves us towards collective study, in which we willingly open ourselves to change, trusting that, regardless the dominance of onto-Eurocentric epistemologies, our commitments to decolonial feminist practices remain resilient through mutual support.

Decolonial Feminist Praxis

To offer a sense of our approach to decolonial feminist praxis, we describe our evolving commitments to interrogating canonical works, engaging in epistemic disobedience, and delinking from Eurocentric systems of knowledge. The act of reading together has enabled us to question canonicity in our own disciplines and to interrogate our respective roles in the reproduction and further entrenchment of Western epistemologies. Following Ahmed (2017), we take up the task of interrogating how canons come to be shaped and formed: “how selections are made ... who or what does not survive these selections” (p. 17). Becoming accountable for the ways that certain voices have come to dominate while others have been forcibly appropriated, marginalized, invisibilized, or entirely excluded (Hill Collins, 2009) is a first step toward decolonial pedagogy. Such critical questioning has led us to revisit departmental and disciplinary curricula – and begin contextualizing and excising works previously unproblematically considered part of a shared tradition, inheritance, or doxa.

How was it that so few of our reading group's authors or texts had ever appeared in our training, courses, and scholarship? Michelle reports having been inducted into philosophy of education through the works of dead white male philosophers, with the (token) inclusion of one or two women who had earned entry into the pantheon of canonized authors for having objected to the greats in ways that stuck (e.g., Martin, 1981). Michelle followed that same citational practice for many years until she began to delve into the feminist texts she had missed during her graduate studies. “Cognitive imperialism,” Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2011) tells us, “rears its ugly head in every discipline

every time a student is told that there is no literature or no thinking available on any given topic from within Indigenous intellectual traditions” (p. 32). This perpetuates “the idea that Indigenous Peoples were not, and are not, thinking peoples – an insidious mechanism to promote neo-assimilation and obfuscate the historic atrocities of colonialism” (Simpson, 2011, p. 32). Suzanne’s training in academic philosophy excluded Indigenous philosophy from disciplinary consideration on the grounds that it is religion or anthropology but not philosophy. Only in the last two years and only through the efforts of, and friendship between, Lorraine Mayer and Sandra Tomsons, has Suzanne’s professional development (via professional association webinars and conferences) included any discussion of Indigenous philosophy (Burkhart et al., 2021; Mayer et al., 2024). Reading together in a different register helps us to grow capacities for grappling with and beginning to undo the cognitive imperialism of our respective academic disciplines.

In writing this paper, we three have talked about and reflected upon our complicities with colonialism in the university. We share the belief that reckoning with complicity is an important aspect of becoming capable of moving towards reparative actions in our teaching and scholarship. We linger with complicity, not in order to confess so as to move from guilt to restoration of pride, but rather to understand the structural effects of settler colonialism in our very constitution as scholars, teachers, and as community beings (Probyn-Rapsey, 2007). The desire for settler self preservation is the impetus for what Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang (2012) name “settler moves to innocence” where settler subjects take up the work of decolonization to allay their discomforts and maintain their sense of themselves as good subjects. In their work analyzing processes of settler colonial socialization in public sector workers, Nisha Nath and Willow Samara Allen (2022) suggest that the contemplation of complicity “can animate settlers to think through implication and power in settler colonial structures and then, most critically, build and enact relational accountabilities” (p. 212). In the words of Shaista Patel (2022), “talking about complicity would remain as just another aspect of settler-centrism if we cannot stay with our failures and the limits of our knowledge, and reflect on them in order to try and do somewhat better another time” (p. 213). While we all acknowledge our complicity with the reproduction of social hierarchies in our teaching and scholarship, our collective conversation brought to light the different ways that we have been positioned in relation to the university. Familiar with the inequitable conditions of the school system, Michelle entered the academy out of synch with the heteronormative biases in her discipline of practice and sensitive to workplace injustice. Suzanne, who also recognized the hierarchy and inequities of the university, avoided the work of institutional transformation and instead entered with the intent of gaining social capital associated with graduate degrees and professional employment while flying under the radar by masquerading as a member of the white middle class. Ian naively saw the university as a bastion for the best of what is thought and

known in the world (an allusion to Matthew Arnold (2015) in *Culture and Anarchy*) and entered it as a portal to a better life. In what follows we each reflect on our complicities and the ways that our reading practice enables us to reckon and move towards repair.

Michelle: Coming to academia from the performing arts and school teaching, I expected to be playing catch-up to my contemporaries farther along in their academic careers. This was amplified by the emotional strain of caring for ailing elders in my pre-tenured years. I took an active role in my faculty union, where I learned how fairness and equity in academic labour relations are eroded by competitive individualism. Many understood and did what they could to support collective rights. Others never attended monthly meetings and were only heard from when something in the collective agreement blocked their career advancement, inciting them to expect union executive to advocate for change that would help them personally but not improve rights overall. When the Truth and Reconciliation Commission shook teachers with its calls to action for Education in 2015, it made plain the hypocrisy of claiming to facilitate human flourishing while perpetuating the epistemic injustice inherent in my own myopic Eurocentric point of view. As a queer white settler teacher-educator responding to these calls, I began to revise my curriculum. One early attempt, in which I clumsily drew parallels between feminist standpoint epistemology and Indigenous world views, prompted two Indigenous students to transfer out of my course on grounds I made them feel uncomfortable. Fixating at first on what I had done wrong, I eventually realized that focusing on myself and the unquestioned value of my worldview was the root of the problem. Since I am complicit in a colonial education system, how could I help matters by performing my feeble understanding of decolonization? First, I must decolonialize my own thinking and teaching; and, as marginalized scholars have made clear, it is not up to them to change my Eurocentric worldview. Discussing decolonial feminisms with other feminists has complicated my view of patriarchy, which helps me realize how separating being queer from my professional persona not only reinforces cis-heteronormativity but also evades my feminist commitment to make the personal political in my own practice. Acknowledging this disavowal helps me connect to the struggles of other marginalized people. Feeling less stuck, I now build into my curriculum works from “outsider” scholars, artists, and activists, and my own writing using queer theory, in an attempt to interrupt the “totalizing claims and political-epistemic violence of modernity” (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018, p. 1).

Reading in this new register raises the opaque veil of the colonizing curriculum that I help perpetuate. All appears correct on its surface: the Eurocentric themes and thinkers who influenced me and the intellectual virtues I impart through my expectations. Questioning the dominant tradition unmask its self-generating epistemic conceits. Kuhnian paradigm shifts and Euro-Western theories of knowledge do not account for other ways of being and knowing denigrated and left to struggle. Our feminist reading helps me recognize what has been missing from my curriculum: epistemic justice (Fricker, 2007) and sensitivity (Medina, 2013), queer and decolonial feminisms (Anzaldúa, 2009; Vergès, 2021), and citational politics (Ahmed, 2017). I work to better understand feminist standpoint epistemology, moral/social epistemology, and activism within scholarly practices, such as citing authors whose work is considered tangential to the dominating debates. Having begun by playing catch-up in the game of academic mastery, I

approach the end of my career grateful to have recognized that mastery is a false and violent game and to have found a restorative and “resistant collectivity” of feminists reading together (Cixous, 1986, as cited in Singh, 2018).

Suzanne: Reading feminists of colour together with others has made visible to me the erasure of women of colour in my teaching and scholarship, my complicity in the maintenance and repetition of patriarchy and colonialism within the university, and has brought me to understand the cascade of harms that flow from maintaining academic status quos. Perry’s (2018) expansive examination of how differently situated persons gain power, privilege, and protection from their proximity to (white) patriarchy and thus aspire to such positionality prompted me to reflect on my own movement within the university as one formed by aspirations to patriarchal proximity. Being bullied as a child, which involved being threatened with death at ages six and 14, at all or predominantly white schools where I was variously read as Pakistani, Black, Indian, Indigenous, an immigrant, a refugee, adopted, and poor instilled me with an intense fear of the dangers (both physical and psychic) of being read as a non-white other by those who easily inhabit the social status quo. I came to see how my long sojourn into abstract universalist thinking and my training in European thought and discourse has to some degree been an attempt to position myself *away* from the complex particularities of my lived experience and in *proximity* to patriarchy in the form of white philosophy. A major part of this positioning has been the reproduction of a white, Western, colonial canon in my teaching and scholarship which, however implicitly, holds this up as an aspirational model for others. Reading Patricia Hill Collins (2009) with others brought me to reflect upon the diversity of knowledges that I had been ignoring in my teaching; the ways my teaching hasn’t honoured community knowledge practices and relations. My psychic investment in the capacity of individuals to know *without* others has led me to reproduce euro-Western, individualist ideals of knowledge as abstracted from social relations by emphasizing individual assignments and by not including assignments in my courses that would encourage (or support) students in connecting with people and communities outside the classroom.

Recognizing my complicity in the reproduction of white, settler colonial scripts and values gives rise to feelings of shame, disappointment, sorrow, and anger. Reckoning with it involves sitting with these emotions and acknowledging both their causes (my personal history and experiences with a racist social order) and consequences, the harms that result from monohumanist, exclusionist teaching and research practices. I begin to shift *away* from repressing these uncomfortable emotions and *towards* becoming capable of engaging in reparative actions. It is a difficult but necessary activity that allows for a process of dis-investment from a colonial form of academic subjectivity and an unmaking and remaking myself as a scholar and as a teacher. As I move through this reckoning I begin to engage in a series of small actions: revising my curriculum to include assignments that value elder and community based knowledges as well as assignments that encourage students to connect with land, engaging peers in collective thinking about how to prevent harm (especially to Indigenous students) in our online class discussion forums and in our syllabi, listening more deeply to a wider range of scholars and allowing their words, perspectives, experiences, and theories to change the shape of my teaching and writing, and collaborating with other academic philosophers whose work involves attending to and cultivating conversations between those

recognized as part of the tradition and those who are excluded from and marginalized by it.

Ian: My unshakable view of the university would only change well after I'd completed my doctoral studies, at which time I'd developed a much more sober-eyed view of the university as a site of exploitation. Through a series of exploitative and precarious contracts as both a sessional instructor and an assistant professor, the sheer weight of these engagements all but eclipsed the levity of my former life at the university. Witnessing first-hand the accelerated expansion of these precarious work arrangements, my former views of the university were both incompatible and irreconcilable with the university of the present. Having commiserated and sympathized for years with colleagues and friends, all seemingly locked into positions designed to chip away at core reserves of dignity, self-worth, and self-preservation, it became imperative that the institutional logics underpinning student and faculty labour needed to be uprooted and transformed for the better.

One of the defining constraints of being precariously employed within the university is the lack of freedom to critique institutional logics, most often expressed through any given department's curriculum. If one is perceived to be contra the institution's mission statement or strategic plan, or if one is merely characterized as a killjoy in one's professional duties, opportunities for continued, partial, or full-time employment are severely limited. The potential to upset students, staff, or faculty through critique, however well-intentioned, is also cast in a negative light because retention of students is of the utmost concern, as is the need to sustain civil and congenial relations among colleagues and administration. Any deviation from the status quo may well be embraced informally during daily exchanges or fleeting conversations, but efforts to critique, reform, or dismantle curriculum (for example) may not necessarily gain favour via the implementation of new policies.

I always considered myself to be oppositional or counter-hegemonic in my approaches to teaching and curriculum, and for that reason I never felt as though I was replicating or reinforcing the most conservative elements of the discipline, department, or university. Most of the time I felt imbricated in a larger constellation of disciplinary and institutional critique, choosing to teach the most challenging contemporary figures that represented ever-present shifts in disciplinary thinking. It never occurred to me that I rarely came close to achieving gender or racial parity in the proposed course readings, or that Indigenous, queer, crip, trans, and even feminist, voices were almost always absent or missing from my syllabi. The desire to expose students to both innovative and foundational thinkers was always at the forefront of my thinking; that I failed to recognize and foreground a wide array of marginalized scholars and figures in my teaching is perhaps the most concrete example I can summon of being complicit in the reproduction of conservative, traditional, and hegemonic ideas, discourses, and politics. Regrettably, my investments in transforming course syllabi to better represent marginalized voices would only truly come with the promise of a tenure-track position and with a sense that cultural and political forces sweeping across the university were making it easier for interested and privileged actors to bring about much needed curricular change. That I have only recently begun to intervene on these fronts (due in large part to the reading group's sustained and ongoing activities) is a source of much personal shame and embarrassment. Taking cues from Ahmed (2014), I am

working diligently to avoid participating in the “foreclosure of responsibility” (p. 119), of perceiving shame as something to be swiftly bypassed or detoured on the way to pride, and of sitting with the ever-pronounced discomforts a decolonial reckoning makes possible.

By avowing our complicities in reproducing colonial hierarchies through curricular and citational onto-eurocentrism and exclusion, we work together to repair our epistemological ignorances and to cultivate that which José Medina (2013) calls “resistant imaginations.” Unseating racial insensibility and “defective habits of arrogant seeing” requires “lucidity with respect to one’s... insensitivity” and “retraining one’s sight and widening one’s vision; that is, developing new habits of racial perception and gender perception” (Medina, 2013, p. 224). The work of repairing sensitivity begins with “friction that can disrupt established habits” and “constitute the starting point of new chains of performance where new social habits get consolidated” (Medina, 2013, p. 224). Such friction generatively emerges from resistant imaginations, “a structural phenomenon that requires social support and practices of interaction” (Medina, 2013, p. 257). Medina (2013) warns against a lack of imaginative resistance, and also against the “rigidification” of one particular form of it (p. 257). Without such ethical-epistemological work across multiple perspectives, any attempts we make in our respective locations towards social and institutional amelioration are bound to reproduce the racial, class, and colonial systems that need to be undone.

We have come to realize that our efforts at transforming curricula away from dominant theories and paradigms risks what Cornell West (1987, p. 201) refers to as “so-called noninstrumental approaches [that] are themselves always already implicated in the raging battle in one’s society and culture.” Alluding to Foucault, Sirma Bilge (2020) claims that “hegemonic rearticulations” result because “our practices are constituted by and constitutive of the governmental rationalities, techniques and affects through which the neoliberal university is made and maintained” (p. 322). It is crucial to keep in mind, therefore, that “the first battle over literary canon formation has to do with one’s historical interpretation of the crisis achieving canonical status” (West 1987, p. 193). West helps us recognize that what we take to be progressive canon formation should not be thought of as separate from our own attitudes and understandings of the societal crisis that moved us to rethink our curricula.

Reading together nurtures “epistemic disobedience” in the interests of bringing about the “delinking of oneself from the knowledge systems we take for granted (and can profit from)” (Mignolo, 2015, p. 107). To embark on such an endeavour alone would prove not only hopelessly lonely but also irredeemably impossible. Moten and Harney (2020, p. 8) remind us that the university trades on the “collective individuation machine of the experience economy,” which teaches students and faculty to subordinate shared experience. Imagine radically altering curricula you may already intimately

know and replacing it with bodies of knowledge at once unfamiliar and foreign to you. The very attempt resists the definition of expert that professional training instills. Such is the work of the decolonial settler academic labourer seeking to transform her discipline and institution for the better. Such work requires ongoing support, such as that generated by “the force and beauty of shared practice over and against individual role” (Harney & Moten, 2020, 22:00). The reading group thus holds space and offers a setting in which this difficult, albeit transformative, work may begin. If we accept the challenge of enacting a politics of decolonial feminist citation – and of developing an active agenda of delinking from colonial ways of knowing and understanding the world, only then can we begin to “adumbrate what was hidden and ignored – and to do this is to recognize, extend, and invent new concepts” relevant to the transformation of our institutions (Mignolo, 2015, p. 115).

Conclusion

In simple terms, the reading group has produced the conditions for the elaboration of feminist critique, a generative practice that began with a firm engagement with contemporary feminist thought and that has since opened out onto broader discussions of the enduring hegemony of settler colonialism in neoliberal institutions. It is within this framework that our group has attempted to take up Denise da Silva’s provocation that “we cannot stay in the work of critique, but we must go *through* critique to get to the work” (as cited in paperson, 2017, p. 43). If moving through critique is a gateway to get to the work of decolonizing, can a feminist reading group even be thought of as participating in this work? Although much of the work carried out in a reading group such as ours seems firmly tethered to the realm of critique (with little to suggest the promise of moving beyond critical exchanges), our experience points to the possibilities inherent in engaging in sustained relations fashioned through collective criticality. Our collaborations have led us to orient ourselves towards a revisioning of our duties, responsibilities, and relations as academics; as such, the iterative formulation of institutional critique (a recurring topic of interest) has influenced us to redirect our energies and efforts to alter, however modestly, our approaches to teaching, scholarship, service, and ethical relations. That many of us belong to different disciplines, institutions, and labour unions has created just enough space for us to reflect on and advance different lines of flight for interventions, resistance, and creative imaginings.

In closing, we are reminded of two companion passages, each of which asserts that the current moment represents an acknowledgement of the limits of decolonizing the academy and society. As Simpson (2014) argues, “while there are sites of decolonization within academic institutions, they still remain a colonizing force upholding the values of heteropatriarchy, settler colonialism and capitalism” (p. 13). Similarly, for Mignolo and Walsh (2018), “decoloniality is not a condition to be achieved in a linear sense, since

coloniality as we know it will probably never disappear” (p. 81). Thus, in the face of ongoing coloniality across the institutions we seek to transform, we recognize the complexity of responding to, and living in, the compromised present, opting instead to cultivate “this refusal to give up in daunting circumstances, this joy, [to delimit] a way to live in the midst of the blasted world” (Shotwell, 2016, p. 200). Through the exploratory and searching nature of this collaborative research endeavour, we have also come to appreciate Shotwell’s notion that we should not be “aiming at purity in any register” (p. 151), but rather grappling with complexity and complicity en route to bringing decolonial futures into being. If, as Shotwell (2016, p. 6) claims, modern life is increasingly predicated on the glaring contradictions that define our personal and collective decision-making and if, in the face of this, we are able to acknowledge the reverberations of colonialism’s unevenly-distributed wounds (Anzaldúa, 2009) past and present, then perhaps our attempt to model how academics can humbly avow complicity in the current (dis)order of things offers hope for continuing engagement in the decolonial politics of relationality, responsibility, accountability, and reconciliation.

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