

Interrogating Inquiry: Resistance and the Academic Mode of Production (or, A Discourse into Left Field)

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In this creative commentary, Rollmann explores the dynamics channelled through the conference space. Reflecting on the experience of the Dynamic Resistances conference and others, he draws attention to the unique vitality of the space and its capacity for both enabling, as well as undermining, resistance to the instantiations of power inherent in the academic mode of production. Drawing on personal experience, he explores how power manifests at conferences and related spaces for knowledge exchange, and questions what resistance might actually look like in such a space.

We all know the type.

You've just finished presenting a talk offering a Foucaultian analysis of, say, Margaret Atwood. It's time for questions. A young man raises his hand.

"Thank you for this talk. But as I was listening, I couldn't help but wonder: what about Badiou?"

A response forms silently in your head: "What *about* Badiou?" but you hold it back. You wait expectantly, for clearly the strategic pause after his question indicates he has not finished speaking.

"I mean...I just found myself thinking about...you know, Badiou, and the intersection of Badiou and how mathematical philosophy relates to all this...and, I mean, clearly there's a resonance here within aesthetics. I'd be interested in hearing your thoughts on the subject."

What he means, of course, is that he's interested in hearing *his* thoughts on the subject, and in ensuring the audience hears his thoughts, or at least, hears him drop a few names and theories. This display is not, of course, about the actual process of knowledge exchange, it's about his concern with using this space—the conference panel—as a site of production for and establishment of his own symbolic capital in the academy.

The conference space is one fraught with such dynamics. And what of resistance to these dynamics? As conference organizers or presenters, we all too rarely reflect on the role played by this space—and our actions within it—as it reinforces a tightly structured, hierarchical academy that many of us try to resist (or at least question) *within* the research that we do.

Examples abound.

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At an international gender studies conference I attended recently, I witnessed two poor presenters grilled relentlessly by an audience member in a queer studies panel. The spectator took issue with their premise, their method, and their analysis. Just when I thought the unpleasant hostility was over, it would begin again. No matter how the presenters responded, it was wrong. They were missing the point. Dear goodness, I thought to myself, weren't we supposed to be oblique and obsequious in our critiques? Wasn't "wrong" the word nobody is supposed to say? In a world where knowledge is constructed, identities fluid, and positionality everything, wasn't it supposed to be impossible for us to actually be wrong about something?

Horrified, I asked who this hostile interloper was.

"That's Jack Halberstam!" my neighbour whispered to me, with all the awe of a gladiatorial spectator.

My world turned upside down; how could my academic hero be so cruel? This wasn't critique: it was a battle; it was "you're wrong!" couched in only slightly less prepossessing terms. It was academic imperialism, it was deterministic, it was absolutely terrifying!

But persecution hath its privileges, for the presenters got to sit with Jack at the conference dinner.

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Some years ago, my department hosted a talk by Jasbir Puar. I hadn't read any of her books, but generally delighted in her theory (as interlocuted by my professors). But her talk, however brilliant, was so obscure I understood barely a word of it. Perhaps it was my approach which was at fault: the initial sentence of her talk sounded quite profound, but by the time I had turned it over in my head, figured out its meaning, assessed its implications and was ready to move on, 50 other sentences had sped by in the interim. I tried taking notes but that only muddled me more. Soon I was drowning in missed metaphors and careening clauses. I surrendered any effort at understanding and allowed myself to drift along the pleasant clouds of her finely formed phrases.

After the talk, I mingled with faculty and students at a reception in her honour. In line for a slice of carrot cake, a fellow doctoral student turned to me. We stared at each other in that awkward moment of anticipation when we try desperately to think of something to say other than "what did you think of the talk?" before inevitably resigning ourselves to the fact it would be somehow inappropriate to discuss *The Simpsons*, what with Jasbir Puar eating carrot cake a dozen paces or so away. It becomes sort of a duel: it's not polite to be the first to ask the inevitable question, but whoever seizes the initial advantage has the good fortune of not having to be the first

to answer it.

“So...” my friend plants her flag. “What did you think?”

“Very interesting!” I reply. “A lot to think about, wouldn’t you say?”

“Yes!” My colleague eagerly, gratefully joins me in amicable, academic ambiguity. “I really need to read more about affect theory.”

“Me too! Hearing this definitely has me interested in reading more of her work.” There is, we all know, nothing at all wrong with indicating that while of course you understand quite clearly the fundamentals of a field, it’s not your subject area. You’re sort of an academic adventurer, earning extra credentials for the interdisciplinarity of your interests and the breadth of your theoretical understanding.

Of course, one can’t venture too far down that road lest the scale of one’s true ignorance be inadvertently revealed. How exactly do you address the fact you just sat through an hour-long talk, none of which you understood, without revealing too much of what you didn’t understand?

You attend to your carrot cake, of course.

As we awkwardly stabbed at our cake, a Notable Faculty turned around ahead of us; he had overheard our conversation with sharper insight than either of us had expected. Balancing his carrot cake in one hand, he made a quick gesture of his hand flying over his head.

“Truth be told,” he whispered, winking at both of us as he leaned in, “I didn’t understand a word of it either!”

And then he went back to very solemnly discussing the talk with his department head.

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Liz Stanley, in her discussion of the academic mode of production, lists the complex variety of “forces of production” utilized within that mode. “The ‘materials worked on,’” she writes, “and the ‘tools of the trade’ include not only blackboards, computers, blank sheets of paper, books, articles and conference papers in the making, but also people” (5). To that list I would add not just conference papers but conferences themselves. They are uniquely charged spaces that act as sites both for the production and consumption of academic capital. This capital can be either material (i.e., empirical data and theory) or symbolic (i.e., reputation, networking, and something for the C.V.). Stanley acknowledges that conferences act as a space where the exchange process of the academic mode of production takes place. But there is something even more profound and less materially tangible occurring within the conference space: a staunch reification of the structures of power that underlie

the academic mode of production. We can, of course, try to challenge such structures as we organize the conference: which papers are accepted, how they are combined into panels, how the panels are structured, and so forth. But there seems a stark inevitability about the form of the final product: somebody will preach to others, and then others will respond. The “other’s” response might be supportive and collegial (not just toward the presenter, but toward the academic structures with which they align) or it could be hostile. It could reflect not so much an interest in the presenter, but an effort by an audience member to boost their own credibility. The conference space becomes an active and unpredictable engagement with the power dynamics of the academy, yet the all-too-predictable result of this interaction is the reification of the academy as a power dynamic. How do we move beyond such power dynamics? Can we? Should we?

Over the years, feminist theory has successfully challenged rigid distinctions between objective and subjective forms of knowledge: between knower and known; researcher and “subject.” Yet, there is much about the modes of academic production and exchange that have not perceptibly changed at all. Kathy Ferguson heralded this fact when, almost 30 years ago, she observed that the success of women’s studies programs—the field that had hoped to change all this—was

only a limited success, since organizational survival, particularly during times of tight money, propels women’s studies programs into the same search for protected turf, for alliances, and for legitimizing techniques that characterizes the other actors within the bureaucratic setting. The requirements of organizational survival are likely to penetrate into the program and endanger the alternative values and processes that the insurgents seek to maintain. (210)

This reactionary turn, this blunting of resistance, is perhaps nowhere so evident as in the space of a conference. Certainly, feminist academics present research that has been conducted in different and challenging ways—the obsessive focus in many feminist studies programs on methodology is a reflection of this intellectual priority—but the way in which research is presented and knowledge exchanged has, by and large, not changed. Academics still rise before others to deliver their papers, still ask and answer questions, still publish their research in obscure journals. Stanley argues the modern social sciences “came into existence as a ‘provider of facts’ to help political rulers rule...[laying] claim to scientific status on a par with the natural sciences, for an indivisible ‘Science’. And thus a place for its practitioners as fundable by government and its direct and indirect institutional apparatus was claimed. Scientism has thus been at the heart of the social science academic mode...” (10-11)

If this is so, perhaps the co-optation of insurgent approaches (like feminist theory and women’s studies programs) in this process is reflected in their lack of critical challenge—their lack of *resistance*—to such deep-seated traditions as the academic conference. For feminist researchers to undertake work that purportedly challenges patriarchal [scientific] hegemonic paradigms of knowledge and knowing through the pursuit of radically different methodologies, yet to present that work within

traditional, timeworn structural processes of knowledge exchange (i.e., conferences) which operate as a fundamental part of that broader [patriarchal] mode of production (thus reinforcing it), is to fundamentally undermine the utility and value of their own individual interventions-through-research. Does, perhaps, the overarching focus in many women's studies programs on feminist methodologies represent a retreat from the challenge of overcoming patriarchal institutions in the academy? The focus becomes innovating methodology as it is applied to research projects, but not as it is applied *outside* of those research projects to challenge broader structures of teaching and learning, departmental hierarchies and decision-making, neoliberal universities and other societal forms of knowledge exchange. Should, perhaps, innovation be sought in the *mode* of academic production itself, *before* dwelling inordinately on the methodological minutiae of research projects? Can we, in fact, undertake transformative research—or research that has transformative results—when we fail to transform (or even try to transform) the institutions through which that research is undertaken?

To put the question more bluntly: when the arena in which innovative research is presented still allows for and offers a space ideally attuned to the subtle, intellectual jostling for power—criticizing presenters and theories through hostile questions, building up one's own sense of prestige through name-dropping and complex interrogations, networking along lines of privilege in the reception after the conference—one is left to wonder what innovation the research has achieved at all.

Jessica Yee, in a recent collection focused on this theme, referred to this phenomenon as the “academic industrial complex of feminism—the conflicts between what feminism means at school as opposed to at home, the frustrations of trying to relate to definitions of feminism that will never fit no matter how much you try to change yourself to fit them, and the anger and frustration of changing a system while being in the system yourself” (13-14). Yee and her co-contributors perceptively identify and critique this problem, but critique does not necessarily yield solutions.

In that same collection, Shaunga Tagore's moving poem, “A Slam on Feminism in Academia”—which highlights many of the problems and inconsistencies of the academic mode of production—also reveals stirringly the material forms of production (and reproduction) on which it is based. She writes:

Why did you let me in this ivory tower
 filled with hippie feel-good activist academics
 debating about feminist organizing in high theory discourse
 while barely-paid migrant workers prepare lunches
 for seminars, conferences, forums
 and get deported the next day... (37)

There are other useful examples to draw on—and to be wary of. In a working paper derived from a talk given at the sixth European Conference on Gender Equality in Higher Education, Maud Eduards describes how ostensible efforts to defend the

integrity and autonomy of the academy in Sweden in fact masked efforts by male academics to resist state-supported gender equity initiatives. This phenomenon is not unique to Sweden, but her analysis reveals how institutionalized processes of knowledge production within the academy are manipulated as props to defend and protect privilege (and resist feminist and equity-based reform). In her case study, traditional “meritocratic appointments” (or the appearance thereof) were presented by defensive male faculty as key to academic integrity, in opposition to feminist-inspired, state-sponsored demands for more positions to be allocated to women. Not only did this mask the gendered nature of the “meritocracy” they sought to uphold, but it also framed the key question—Who is producing the knowledge in the academy?—as one of lesser value.

What is important to draw from such analyses is the tendency to reify the normative traditions and structures of the academic mode of production as a means of waging veiled political struggles against much-needed reform. Those structures become both the sites of struggle (and resistance), as well as the tools of struggle (and resistance). What is important here is to recognize and acknowledge the inherent tensions that exist between feminist resistance and the academic mode of production, and the structural manifestations these tensions assume within the academy. In the case of a conference, it is—I would suggest—insufficient to critique its gendered content (while happily participating in it at the same time). One must question what was it about the structural form of the conference mode itself that lent itself to generating that content outcome, and what was one’s own role as a willing participant in facilitating this?

There were, it is worth noting, some efforts to overcome these challenges at the Dynamic Resistances conference. One panel distributed paper and pencils and asked people to draw their reactions to the talk as it proceeded. They also commenced with a round-table of audience introductions, to try to reduce alienated space between presenter and audience. These efforts were not particularly successful for various reasons, but it’s laudable that the presenters tried. Perhaps such efforts, applied on a broader and more ambitious (and more reflective) scale might indeed begin to move us toward true change.

So what do we do with all this? How do we reconcile the need to practice our politics with the politics of credibility in a mode of academic production nobody really seems to enjoy, but in which everybody feels compelled to participate?

Well perhaps the point is to make something of it that we *can* enjoy, or at least something we can approach with a sense of deeper honesty and integrity; in many ways, this means making the conference something approachable without fear. Fear—of failure, of change, of challenge, of innovation—acts as a barrier to transformative change, and nowhere is this more evident than in the academic mode of production. Fear of failure is rendered all the more acute in an increasingly competitive (neoliberal, corporate) academic environment: the scramble by a growing number of researchers for a diminishing number of decent jobs within the academy threatens to enhance fear of failure and all the terrible things that flow from fear of failure

(lack of creativity, failure to ask original questions, failure to propose daring ideas, unquestioned obedience to existing structures and customs, academic dishonesty and plagiarism). When the challenge and barriers become ever more acute, however, examples of resistance and integrity shine brighter and with all the more inspiring a light. And such examples do exist.

I find myself recalling a graduate conference I helped organize a few years ago. Naturally, as an organizer I was expected to facilitate a session. The normal expectations were to make introductions, keep time, and ask intelligent questions in order to help the presenters feel good about themselves in the event of any awkward silences. My session went swimmingly until we came to the final presentation. He was a doctoral student of education, and presented something-or-other on Paolo Freire. I say “something-or-other” because, quite frankly, I could barely understand a word of it. As you are now no doubt forming an impression of me as somebody who cannot understand a word of any presentation I attend, allow me to simply explain that the presentation was theory-heavy to such a degree that had the presenter been on board a boat with Jasbir Puar, the boat would no doubt have capsized—in gentle waters.

As the minutes ticked away and we drew toward the inevitable close of the talk, I was filled with a growing sense of horror and dread. Paolo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, this was the sort of stuff I did! I hadn't actually read Freire, but surely this sort of critique of institutionalized academic knowledge and the need for community engagement was something I should be able to engage with. Only, I had no idea what the presenter was saying! What if I asked him something he had quite clearly already said? What if I asked him a question that suggested his argument was actually the opposite of what it was? What if he asked a question back? Dear goodness, what if he asked me to clarify my question? (“Well, first, to ensure that I've asked the correct question, perhaps you could clarify your talk,” I would have to respond). *What if everybody else but me had understood?*

Well, time was up and sure enough, when I opened the floor for questions, an awkward silence ensued. I forget what I eventually asked—something nondescript about how he felt his intriguing insights could best be instantiated into practical change in...the immediate context of...this specific academic community...Anyway, I somehow muddled through and he gave a long-winded answer and thankfully it all worked out and off to the pub we went.

The following year, I was once again assisting with the same conference. Once again, I was drafted into facilitating a panel. Once again, I didn't bother—I mean, didn't have a chance to peruse my panel abstracts until about half an hour before the session began. One of the names seemed oddly familiar. Somebody presenting on Paolo Freire and *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. NO! It couldn't be.

But it was. The very same doctoral student, presenting what at a glance appeared to be the very same presentation. Had he not learned? Had I not learned? What was I to do with this situation? Well, I resigned myself to the inevitable and when his turn

came, I braced myself. But to my profound surprise, he began the talk by addressing the one he had given the previous year. He explained that the previous year he had given a talk on the same subject, but reflecting on that talk during the subsequent year, he had come to realize how profoundly unacceptable it had been. He had made it completely theory-heavy to the point of near incomprehensibility; he had ignored the very fundamentals of his argument, by locating a discussion of the need for community engagement in a completely inaccessible and haughty academic treatise. In fact he wished to recant the entire talk he had given the previous year, and this year he hoped to give the talk that he wished he had given the previous year. And then he proceeded to give one of the clearest, most accessible and intriguing talks I had heard all year.

The experience had a profound effect on me. What struck me most was not the actual content of his talk, but the fact of his publicly recanting the previous year's talk—the fact he had recognized an incongruity in his approach to the academic mode of production, at least insofar as it related to that which he was trying to produce through this mode—a method of enhancing the impact and role of the academy on community-based change initiatives.

This here was an act of resistance: a courageous act with meaning far beyond the substance of his research. His resistance to the very mode of production to which he had contributed the previous year was fearless, personal...and inspiring. This was a resistance to the entire mode of academic production that would resonate with me for years. I often wonder to myself whether (in the unlikely event I might find myself wrong about something) I would have the same courage this fellow had. Would my instincts lead me toward resisting the strictures of a system that reifies itself even as we seek to resist it?

Would any of us?

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