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Co-Authoring Values, group-written contribution by participants in the Feminist Duration Reading Group

by Diana Baker Smith, Cinzia Cremona, Giulia Damiani, Lina Džuverović, Lucia Farinati, Sabrina S Fuller, Laura Guy, Felicie Kertudo, Gabby Moser, Sara Paiola, Helena Reckitt, Irene Revell, Patricia Sequiera Bras, Amy Tobin, Ehryn Torrell

The Feminist Duration Reading Group has met in London, UK, since March 2015 to explore under-known feminisms from outside the mainstream Anglo-American feminist canon. Starting with and often returning to an emphasis on Italian feminisms, monthly meetings have encompassed various other regional and national feminisms, as well as radical aesthetic and political positions.

Why do you think reading and research groups like these are needed?

Lina Džuverović (LD): It's important to open up non-hierarchical, egalitarian, non-networky situations in this cut-throat environment in which competition and exclusivity are seen as default and have been normalised. I appreciate the multiplicity of feminist voices and perspectives in the Feminist Duration Reading Group, the intergenerational aspect, and the acceptance of people's diverse entry points into feminisms. I also value the decolonial mission, the drive to offer horizontal feminist narratives and destabilise the dominant ones by inserting many under-represented geographies and voices. It is through creating and fostering initiatives where people can come together in an environment in which they can be vulnerable and not have to prove themselves that we encourage solidarity and support each other.

Helena Reckitt (HR): Vulnerability is really important. That's why we emphasise staying with the text, so that we look at something that we have in common - during the space of our encounter - rather than rely too much on knowledge brought in from outside the group context. We have developed a practice of reading out loud, one person at a time, paragraph-by-paragraph, as we make our way round the room.

Ehryn Torrell (ET): It's so worthwhile to slow down a text, hear it read aloud and engage with something here and now in the company of others. The group acts as a counterpoint to digital communication, which often occurs in isolated silos or echo chambers.

Diana Baker Smith (DBS): Re-entering a text and reconsidering its relevance in the moment makes the experience contemporary, in that the group enters into a kind of spatio/temporal relationship. Through this 'space of encounter' the various and diverse voices (both in the room and in the texts) are able to enter into a generative dialogue about contemporary feminism/s.

Lucia Farinati (LF): This is a key mode of collective transmission which contrasts the capitalist mode of production and distribution, but also a form of learning (and unlearning) which is open to experimentation and risk. Those things that institutions normally do not like!

Laura Guy (LG): Lucia's point is so important. Reading and self-education have been central to collective struggle. The feminist reading groups in Scotland I am involved in connect to a history of collective reading in the context of the Women's Liberation Movement and, to a lesser extent, Gay Liberation in the late 1960s and 70s. Partly, this is because these groups often revisit texts from this period. On the one hand, contemporary groups inhabit a model and history of collective practice (with all the promise described here but also problems that one often encounters in organising, such as feelings of unease or discomfort and experiences of/with power within non-hierarchical spaces). On the other, they belong to a moment when it has been, and continues to feel, important to return to recent histories of feminist and queer politics in order to excavate unrealised possibilities and interrogate dominant genealogies. Of course, the two are connected. The practice of feminist community is the site from which theory emerges.

Gabby Moser (GM): I want to print Laura's phrase, "in order to excavate unrealised possibilities," on Feminist Duration Reading Group t-shirts. My participation (often from afar) in this group and in organizing other reading groups and workshops in Toronto with the feminist collective EMILIA-AMALIA is driven by similar impulses and

concerns. Above all I am motivated by a desire to increase intergenerational knowledge transmission between feminist practitioners, opening up space to learn about histories that were overlooked in the conventional narrative of feminist “waves” of activity, and to learn directly from both older and younger women’s life experiences.

Felicie Kertudo (FK): When it comes to theories that end in “ism”, there is always a struggle, a barrier to understanding. They are not accessible to everyone and that is a pity. However, exploring the diverse applications and the concrete manifestations of feminism, going beyond the epistemological debates, reading out loud and sharing experiences, allows feminism to pursue its aim: constantly questioning the status quo, by offering a more sustainable/democratic/inclusive alternative. Gatherings such as the reading group are a step towards a utopia that, maybe one day, will, I hope, become reality.

Amy Tobin (AT): This generative way of being, thinking and speaking together feels urgent, during a long period of austerity in the UK. It counters the individuation and alienation that structure so much contemporary life-work, and which counter-intuitively curb the possibility of following interests and non-productive commitments. Perhaps the ‘necessity’ of these groups is that they are free, and non-productive, at a moment when higher education is expensive and compromised by marketisation.

Patricia Sequiera Bras (PSB): It is important to encourage the reading of non-Anglo-Saxon (English-written) feminisms, both in form (the methods we use) and in content. The Feminist Duration Reading Group is aligned with a kind of anti-assimilationist radical feminism different from liberal feminism, which is currently so present.

Sara Paiola (SP): While I agree that it is important that under-represented feminist traditions and cultures are known in the ‘first world,’ they should not be instrumentalised. Their importance lies in how they impact our consciousness as feminists and make a concrete change in the way we think and feel about ourselves, our bodies, the capitalist and colonialist world we live in, and patriarchy. If they remain intellectual or aesthetic exercises, they lose their potential.

AT: Maybe this kind of group work, sitting within legacies of political research and writing, is the only way we keep certain histories in view, as well as how we change the blind spots that damaged other moments of political activism. This is what duration means for me and I think we could be more careful about the rhetoric of rescue, especially when some histories are life stories being lived and remembered. These theories and ideas should not simply be content rediscovered, but should become ways of working and thinking differently.

What does embodied citation as a feminist practice mean to you?

HR: I see the group's monthly commitment to gathering as feminists to explore feminisms as a form of embodied citation, which entails who and what we reference and acknowledge, and where we put our energy, attention, and care.

ET: Embodied citation means asking *who* and stating *who* in order to share and trace the lineage of thought. It is an expression of inheritance and an invitation to think collectively, rather than the individualist approach of shaping ideas on the backs of others. Céline Condorelli's PhD thesis, 'In Support,' where she identifies that we befriend issues as well as ideas, resonates strongly with me. I grew up experiencing this as 'associations,' a term I used to describe my attachment to not only knowledge, but where, why, how and from whom I obtained it.

Sabrina S Fuller (SSF): Yes! That is absolutely crucial. And has always been a feminist principle. Listening to our own and other women's experience to generate theory and practice, rather than listening to the 'experts'. In those terms embodied citation manifests for me above all in 'the practice of doing' – in collective working. It has become an explicit guiding principle for me in how I work and how I practise and I regularly reference – verbally and in my writing - the Milan Women's Bookshop Collective as my source for this 'way of being'.

Cinzia Cremona (CC): I understand embodied citation as a form of 'being there' in a simple way that has consequences beyond the moment. Reading the words of others and discussing them together materialises practices and voices from the past

and from elsewhere, refreshing them in our own bodies. By being there, we also add to a growing chain of embodied citations, for example by writing together and re-circulating our shared reflections. Some simple shared moments stand out for me - accepting a slice of homemade cake, arranging the chairs and buying wine resonates with the convivial moments in the *150 Hours School* film about feminist pedagogy in Italy for women without high school education. For me, those simple moments of taking care cement and extend the trust, growth and dialogue. Extending the invitation to contribute to this document continues this process.

Giulia Damiani (GD): In my understanding this is both a consciousness and an 'unconsciousness' raising activity. It is a consciousness raising activity because it shows the way that through our references and citations we risk repeating a generalised notion of feminism and of womanhood, specifically a western one. In this way embodied citation is a consideration on the diversity of our sources, on the bodies we bring back into being through our texts. It is also deeply connected to forms of re-enactment and re-staging of the past in the present for future appropriation. In this sense I like to see it as an 'unconsciousness' activity, one through which we allow ourselves to be 'possessed' by other voices, gestures, by other women, to unlearn the boundaries of our personal positions. These processes have been relevant to the Feminist Duration Reading Group sessions, which combine reflections on the sources and the opportunity to be playful.

LF: I am fascinated by the concept of embodied citation both in relation to this group and more generally as a feminist strategy that puts affect and care at its core. I see the practice of embodied citation in the tradition of performative utterance, body to body transmission, and what ultimately has been theorized in terms of performative and affective archive. Although we use written texts as a point of reference, the act of reading these texts aloud, to perform and re-perform the words of other women through our mouths and breaths, is a practice of returning text into speech and speech into action. This practice of reading together, giving voice to the text, creates a strong impact on the listener. In Latin 'citation' means both to project the voice, to call and put into action. So embodied citation can be seen an action per se, which values voice as much as relationality.

Irene Revell (IR): In terms of consciousness raising and intersectional questions, in contrast the act of reading a text aloud together is an interesting way of attending to difference within a group that is not about explicit declaration (as in consciousness raising), but rather learning to listen to others and with hope becoming more attuned to the situation, more present. In the most straightforward sense, we hear immediately each other's vulnerabilities, pleasures, dislikes and so on; who might struggle more with English as a second language, with reading itself, with being weary, excited, bored, confused, each body inevitably produces difference in the text. And most crucially, the option to pass over reading altogether (refusal).

AT: The way we read in the group, what here is being linked to embodied citation, is something more temporary and autonomous than consciousness raising, and valuable for it. There is an attempt to be together in the room, and to leave behind other pressures, and anxieties, although this may not always be successful, and certainly isn't when you can't even make the meeting. Without suggesting there is a definitive break between the life of the mind and embodied existence, for me the practice of the reading group is more intertextual, about looking again at a text and enacting a shared reading. A way of reading that is entirely different from my own independent readings of the same texts, almost anonymous and liberating for it. Perhaps embodied citation is a kind of temporary ownership, where you can articulate something on your own terms, a piece of choreography which you can learn and transmit through the specificity of your own voice/gesture?

HR: The group has become more collaborative since a Working Group formed earlier this year to take more responsibility for planning.

SSF: That's what the Milan Women's Bookshop collective call 'the practice of doing' isn't it? If we do things together we get to know each other and trust each other and become part of a feminist community. I've been much happier since we started the working group - feeling involved and useful.

HR: I have felt happier, too. The regularity of the sessions helps me to stay in touch with my feminist values. I appreciate being able to reach out to other regulars if I

want someone to go with to a political demo, for instance. There's a sense that other people in the group have got your back.

ET: I identify with this strongly! I truly feel like we've been co-authoring values, that are expansive, embedded and never static. One value is perhaps looking back to look forward - reading texts from recent history that some of the people in the sessions have lived through or have personal experience with, while others are listening to the past. As we do this, collectively we're thinking about our present and possible futures.

CC: I really like this expression of co-authoring values. We all need to feel legitimised to co-create values that emerge from lived experience and specific contexts. So many young people state 'I'm not a feminist', mostly because they feel that they have to fit into a defined shape. Feeling allowed and encouraged to co-author values with one's peers and across generations and locations can create a sense of ownership of feminism in younger generations.

DBS: 'Co-authoring' seems to refer back to the idea of embodied citation too. By collectively being with the text, slowing down and reciting the work of others, we not only acknowledge the 'text', we co-author new ideas, new values, and new ways of thinking through the conversations that take place. This kind of process creates a sense of agency and encourages critical and creative thinking about the way we might individually and collectively find our voice within feminist theory and practice.

The authors contributed to a shared online document over the course of several days, from London, Glasgow, Sydney, and Toronto. Each has participated in the Feminist Duration Reading Group, by leading or hosting a meeting and/or attending regularly. Their current jobs and roles encompass artist, carer, community organiser, lecturer, mother, researcher, translator, writer, and MA and PhD student.