Ordering Things

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In autumn 2010 three librarians at York University in Toronto formed a group to read Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things*.[1] Our academic backgrounds were diverse, but we were all hungry for the kind of idea-based conversations that weren't happening in our bureaucratic workplace. We wanted to move beyond granular discussions about daily operations into reflecting upon the implicit ideologies behind decision-making and practices in our field. Together we sought to explore how these ideological bases connected to broader trends in society, the production of knowledge, and the politics of memory. At the outset at least one of us was fairly skeptical about post-structuralism and its practical application, and none of us were well versed in this literature or in Foucault's work.

The central claim of Foucault's text—that in each period of history knowledge is structured by certain epistemological assumptions that determine what is considered true—seemed relevant to academic librarianship's emphasis on the stewardship of knowledge. Our classification schemes, preservation protocols, and collection access services are arguably reifications of these assumptions. Recognizing these connections, we decided to take up his questions, read his (often impenetrable) book, and see where this dialogue might lead us.

This essay will not explicitly engage Foucault's work: our emphasis is on collaborative reading of critical theory itself as an act of resistance and inspiration in a neoliberal work environment. So much of our day-to-day lives in academic libraries are rooted in what David James Hudson calls a

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1 Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Tavistock, 1970).

"pedagogy of the practical," where we teach supposedly practical skills and focus on delivering services and smooth operations.[2] There is a religion made of efficiency and clear outcomes, even though we are rarely efficient and our outcomes are difficult to document. Theorizing—even reflection—is seen as a frill in an environment where we are always crunched for time. Attention to the practical is of course necessary when delivering services, but it becomes a problem when it occludes dialogue, reflection, critique, research, and discovery. This problem presents itself as a failure to imagine that libraries can do more than serve the quotidian needs of neoliberal higher education priorities. This failure also represents a social loss, as there are myriad ways in which academic libraries might contribute to society beyond student success and career preparation (for example: developing skills and resources for citizenship and political critique, reversing erasures and gaps in the historical record through critical digital humanities and/or collections projects, or even attending to students' lives and mental health outside of their studies).[3] There are also ways libraries might encourage students to resist the corporate ideologies in higher education, rather than merely propping them up with career services desks and just-in-time instruction models that chunk literacy skills into a series of consumable objects to acquire.[4]

Our small reading group experiment was a stab at moving beyond the practical to the reflective and the imaginative, to explore the radical potential of leisure and play with co-workers, to slow down, and to focus on dialogue, friendship, and camaraderie rather than stilted professional relations. It was also a chance to navigate the tricky area between theory and practice—we read at a high theoretical level but grounded our musings in critical examinations of the mundane practicalities of our professional lives. It was a liminal space, blurring the edges of various binaries: home/work, leisure/work, friend/co-worker, and theory/practice. Like any liminal space, our existence inside it shed some light on the polarizing conditions that produce these binaries.

If, as Karen Nicholson has argued, academic libraries are boxed in by neoliberal ideologies reified through discourses of constant crisis and the need for "transformational change,"[5] was there some way to step outside and

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2 Hudson, "On Critical Librarianship & Pedagogies of the Practical" (keynote presentation, Critical Librarianship & Pedagogy Symposium, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ, February 25–26, 2016), http://hdl.handle.net/10150/612654.

3 Of course there are librarians engaged in this kind of work, but rarely in a coordinated and well-resourced fashion, nor is it generally a key plank of libraries' strategic planning documents.

4 Karen P. Nicholson, "'Taking Back' Information Literacy: Time and the One-Shot in the Neoliberal University," in *Critical Library Pedagogy Handbook, Volume One: Essays and Workbook Activities*, eds. Nicole Pagowsky and Kelly McElroy (Chicago: ACRL, 2016): 25–39, http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/fimspub/41/.

5 Karen P. Nicholson, "The McDonaldization of Academic Libraries and the Values of Transformational Change," *College & Research Libraries* 76, no. 3 (2015): 328–338, doi:10.5860/crl.76.3.328.

estrange ourselves from the everyday ideological blindness incurred by life inside a consumer-managerialist institution? To think differently? To think about *why* we do the things we do, rather than just about how to measure them?

The group, which met outside of work over plates of food and bottles of wine, was personally and professionally transformative for all three of us. This informal reflection will first offer a bit of context about our work-place, and then we will present our thoughts on the following three points: anti-intellectual currents in academic libraries, reading as a mechanism for dialogue, and reading and slow conversation as resistance. Finally we will turn to the ways in which our reading group inspired further acts of resistance in our own professional praxis.

Setting the Table: York University Libraries

York University is the third largest in Canada, with about 52,000 students and 7,000 faculty and staff. Situated at the outskirts of Toronto, it is a comprehensive research university with a highly diverse student body, roughly half of whom are the first in their family to attend university. As a large urban (mostly commuter) school, it struggles with identity—historically known as a university with a focus on the liberal arts and social justice,[6] today it copes with the ongoing austerity regime of higher education in Canada by deploying strategies familiar to any academic worker: expanding applied and professional degree programs, developing large and far-flung international student recruitment initiatives, participating in "quality assurance" programs with dubious outcomes, instituting entrepreneurial activity-based budgeting, engaging a mania for metrics, and increasing the pool of precarious contract and sessional academic workers while slowly eliminating tenure-track positions (two-thirds of undergraduate courses at York are now delivered by contract faculty).[7] York also has a tradition of significant labor resistance, with several strong unions on campus and a history of long and bitter strikes, particularly by the union representing contract faculty and teaching assistants. In 1974, the faculty association was one of the first in the country to include librarians as full members.[8]

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6 For instance it was the first university in Canada to have a graduate program in Women's Studies.

7 CBC News, "York University Offer Rejected by 2 of 3 Bargaining Units of CUPE 3903," *CBC News*, March 9, 2015, http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/york-university-offer-rejected-by-2-of-3-bargaining-units-of-cupe-3903-1.2988317.

8 One of our colleagues, Patti Ryan, who has been engaged in a lengthy research project about the labor history of York librarians and archivists, tells us librarian inclusion occurred two years before YUFA certified as a bargaining unit. Other Ontario universities, in Windsor and Guelph, preceded York in including librarians in their associations.

York University Libraries comprises four libraries: one for business; one for science, health, and engineering; one at York's French language campus; and a central library serving the humanities, fine arts, social sciences, environmental studies, and education, while also hosting pan-library services such as cataloging, acquisitions, and digital initiatives. Like most academic libraries, it exemplifies the McDonaldized environment detailed by Brian Quinn, John Buschman and Karen Nicholson. Despite the wide-ranging talents and expertise of its librarians and staff, the system struggles to be innovative and the daily life of staff includes many busy-work activities such as the generation and description of use statistics often at the expense of time to create or critically reflect. There is an inculcation of a consumerist service mentality (giving students value for their tuition dollars), and emphasis on action (or market) research rather than critical librarianship research.[9] York University Libraries also has one of the lowest librarian-to-student ratios in Canada.[10]

The three authors were hired as system-wide coordinators, and we experienced what has been described as Coordinator Syndrome,[11] where junior colleagues are hired into management-type positions outside of management and are expected to use their hard work, skills, and personal persuasiveness to establish a new service (or systematize a set of services) with little power and few resources. Such roles lead to early burnout and disillusionment, which we were all experiencing by the time we began our reading group. Sarah was hired to coordinate an e-learning program for the libraries; Bill to take over design, architecture, and marketing of our web presence; Lisa was the information literacy coordinator, with a mandate to institute best practices and systematize the teaching programs across the libraries. We each also had extra local branch responsibilities. Sarah, isolated at our small French language campus twenty kilometers east, was responsible for subject librarian and liaison work; Bill performed reference work at the business library; Lisa managed the central library's daily information literacy activities and was also the liaison for English literature.

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9 Brian Quinn, "The McDonaldization of Academic Libraries?" *College & Research Libraries* 61, no. 3 (2000): 248–261, doi:10.5860/crl.61.3.248; John Buschman, "The Library in the Life of the Public: Implications of a Neoliberal Age," *Library Quarterly: Information, Community, Policy* 87, no. 1 (2017): 55–70, doi:10.1086/689314; Nicholson, "The McDonaldization of Academic Libraries and the Values of Transformational Change."

10 One of the small pleasures of this work environment, however, is a culture with a delightfully absurdist gallows humour that generates such works as William Denton's "A Modest Proposal for a More Efficient Organizational Decision-Making Effectiveness Structure at York University Libraries."

11 Library Loon, "The C-Word," *Gavia Libraria*, December 15, 2011, https://gavialib.com/2011/12/the-c-word/. See also Veronica Arellano Douglas and Joanna Gadsby's "Gendered Labor and Library Instruction Coordinators: The Undervaluing of Feminized Work," (presentation, ACRL 2017 Conference, Baltimore, MD, March 23, 2017), http://www.ala.org/acrl/sites/ala.org.acrl/files/content/conferences/confsandpreconfs/2017/GenderedLaborandLibraryInstructionCoordinators.pdf.

Slowly Starving Ourselves to Death: Anti-Intellectualism in Academic Libraries

Remembering the wine-stained pages of our copies of *The Order of Things*, we now see we were looking for a chance to engage with colleagues on a deeper level, and were curious to find out if others were also frustrated with the administration and the lack of space for political critique. Above all, we were thirsty for intellectual conversation and for an environment where our voices would be heard and respected, but also challenged. We now believe that our feeling that the work of reading theory was inessential—possibly self-indulgent—was a product of the anti-intellectual neoliberal work environment described above.

One would think working in such a large university, we would not be starved for intellectual conversation, but we found that our professional lives were full of meetings, classes, email, more meetings, and more email. We would sometimes silently reflect on what we were missing when sitting with our colleagues at our monthly meeting, where everyone repeats words they have said and actions they have performed for years, seemingly unable to break free to any kind of fresh discussion or action leading to effect. PowerPoint decks describe new services and initiatives for information and marketing purposes, not for debate, reflection, or critique. We were trapped in a particular discursive formation, and as Quinn first pointed out and Nicholson developed, this entrapment is a symptom of academic libraries becoming McDonaldized. This process has consequences, as "boldness, experimentation, and organizational responsiveness all suffer as a result. In a time of rapid change, McDonaldized libraries are slow to respond, simplistic, and shortsighted because they are unable to engage the heads and hearts of their employees and are out of touch with the real needs of their users."[12]

We all felt the alienation generated by this process—we were dissatisfied, trapped on the fast food assembly line, feeling as if our intellectual lives had guttered out. We missed the excitement of discovering new complicated theoretical ideas with no immediate practical application. We needed space for reflection. We felt it was time to make some sort of change in our careers, but we weren't sure what or how. We also felt this lack of reflection was having a negative effect on how we did our jobs. Sarah and Bill were working on improving the Libraries' web presence but faced obstacles and opposition to any changes, and discovered a tension between the role of the site as a pedagogical tool for accessing resources and finding information versus its use as a vehicle for promotion and marketing the library. Lisa felt she wasn't

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12 Quinn, "The McDonaldization of Academic Libraries?"

pushing hard enough in her classroom teaching to really connect ideas around knowledge and power with research tools, libraries, and archives. She thought she could do better for the students. Tied to all of these frustrations was a sense from some of our public service librarian peers that the *real* work of librarians was in helping students and thus any demand from them, no matter how small or how it might distract from major initiatives, required immediate attention. Library administration wanted us to focus on new and innovative services, but at the same time we received conflicting demands from them too about prioritizing daily student needs: the customer was always right. A deep contradiction resides here, as the affective labor of public service and teaching is work given low status in libraries and higher education, trapping librarians in a paradigm where they are bad librarians if they do less public service, and bad academics if they do less research at the expense of public service.[13]

Further, at York University research and professional development is one of the three pillars of our job (along with librarianship and service), and meant to make up about one-third of our time. We are allotted twenty-two "research days" each year. The contradiction is clear: the time allotted does not equal one-third of our work year. Perhaps unsurprisingly, none of us felt that forming a reading group to tackle a philosophical and difficult text such as *The Order of Things* was proper research that would quickly lead to a publication, nor that we could use our research days to read it. This sense of the unimportance of our work correlates to Nicholson's view that in academic libraries there is an emphasis on action research that "support(s) managerialist narratives of accountability, audit, and value — operationalized as return on investment."[14] This group did not begin with a clear ROI in mind. Nicholson further notes that this glorification of action research is a result of "the context of higher education today, [in which] academic libraries must provide evidence of their impact in order to compete for resources. The ideology of consumer capitalism regulates our work." Any research that does not demonstrate the impact of services or collections on students and faculty is inessential. It's ironic that in this environment the university administration is pushing for more "research" and our administration has indicated (informally) that it is disappointed in our librarians' current level of research output. They have set clear limits on what kind of research they consider valuable

13 Lisa Sloniowski, "Affective Labor, Resistance, and the Academic Librarian." *Library Trends* 64, no. 4 (2016): 645–66, doi:10.1353/lib.2016.0013.

14 Karen Nicholson, "Research and the Value Agenda," *Open Shelf*, March 1, 2017, http://www.open-shelf.ca/170301-research-and-the-value-agenda/.

and have created such strict time and space parameters for us to do that work that it is difficult to succeed given the size of our complement relative to the student body and our service obligations.

Consequently, rather than use our precious research days for tackling critical theory, each month we would read a chapter in our free time, then meet for dinner and drinks to discuss what we had gleaned from it. This intellectual pursuit of "inefficient" reading and talking needed to be extra-curricular. No one counseled us to do it this way, but the climate made our discussion seem frivolous. Interestingly, in the long run, it significantly altered all of our career paths and led to the publication of this essay — which by measures of quantity, at least, boosts the output metrics by which our value is measured.[15] A strange and unintended colonization of life by work, perhaps, but we enjoyed our time together.

After we ate we would open our books and take out our notes and perform a close reading of the chapter. We would take turns summarizing what we had understood from each page and highlight passages that we had particularly liked or that had gone over our heads. Sometimes we would spend an hour on one or two sentences, debating what Foucault was expressing, contemplating what his philosophy meant to us, and ultimately how we saw this philosophical belief reflected in our own environments. Like the analysis of "Las Meninas" in *The Order of Things*, we examined Foucault's writing from a variety of lenses for that which was represented and not represented. This type of intellectual conversation is often viewed as essential for faculty members and forms the basis of courses, lecture series, conferences and colloquiums focused on expanding the parameters of knowledge in a field. By contrast, we librarians hid away by ourselves.

Nonetheless, through this experience we learned that means are as important as ends. How one works toward an understanding of something is as important as achieving that understanding. Librarians write code, manage metadata, develop collections, run scholarly publishing services, teach, assess, advocate, and more. Talking and thinking about the code, the metadata, the collections and services and activities, and the systems they inhabit, is also work, real work, and we shouldn't do one without the other. As Barbara Fister explains, "the value of our profession and of the library as a social institution is that we are uniquely positioned to see the big picture, to recognize patterns

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15 We recognize a certain complicity with neoliberal logic here, but perhaps it is useful to point out the internal contradictions of the ideology, in line with arguments suggested by Cathy Eisenhower and Dolsy Smith. "The Library as 'Stuck Place': Critical Pedagogy in the Corporate University," in *Critical Library Instruction: Theories and Methods*, eds. Maria Accardi, Emily Drabinski, and Alana Kumbier (Duluth, MN: Library Juice Press, 2010), 305–17.

in the ways societies create and share knowledge."[16] In order to see this big picture we need to take the time to reflect, to theorize, and to observe.

Our reading group experience raises questions such as: is anti-intellectualism a type of internalized professional insecurity in librarianship? Do we feel incapable of producing "real" research like "real" faculty members and then create working climates and conditions that become a self-fulfilling prophecy? If so, did we fight for academic status only to diminish the work of colleagues who actually take up the responsibility of trying to develop new knowledge, insight, and methods? What is lost, both practically and intellectually, when we push this sort of theoretical research to the fringes of the profession and see the work of knowledge expansion and discovery as the work of scholars in other fields? We would argue, along with Hudson, Nicholson, and others, that the responsibility for this anti-intellectual marginalization of theory and insecurity in our profession lies in a number of factors, including the nature of LIS education, a service mentality caused by the emphasis on affective labor (oddly conjoined with an over-arching devaluation of that same affective labor), the bureaucratization of library work in large academic libraries, a preference for "doing" over "thinking" (as if these activities are separable) and, finally, an over-valuation of action research. These factors emerge from neoliberal logics embedded in higher education that increasingly prioritize the applied over the theoretical and give preference to activities that have demonstrable immediate impact over the slow generation of ideas. Our group's existence was in some way a resistance to this logic, despite our capitulation to doing everything outside of work hours and spaces.

Chewing the Fat: Reading as Dialogue

As mentioned, over time our reading group became less about Foucault's ideas than about a kind of post-structuralist-inspired, slant-wise look at our workplace and its neoliberal underpinnings. We saw the project as a counter-measure to the anti-intellectualism of our workplace, and relished exploring critical theory without a clearly articulated plan describing how we would leverage our debates, or how to use the group as a vehicle for publishing or to generate measurable outcomes.

Our purpose was to have meaningful dialogue that would spark ideas. A by-product was that the group also created a supportive social community that we did not initially realize we were lacking, nor had we noticed

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16 Barbara Fister, "The Self-Centered Library: A Paradox," *Library Babel Fish*, August 28, 2012, https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/library-babel-fish/self-centered-library-paradox.

the alienating consequence of that deficit. Reading as a means for creating dialogue that develops ideas and affective connections between people does not happen as regularly as it should in neoliberal libraries—often it is only at conferences or association meetings that one is able to have such conversation and community. How might our work lives be improved by having such intellectually rich conversations closer to home, while also fostering professional relationships that are generative and generous and might lend themselves to productive, or at least more humane, workplace interactions?

Any one of our evenings is a good example of how the group became a dialogic and generative space. It would begin with a reflection on the last month and the operational issues and challenges that we were each dealing with in our departments and committees. We would also sometimes share what was happening in our personal lives. Because we were not from the same branch in the system, we could share insights and experiences without feeling that anyone would pass judgement. We would often reflect on announcements and actions of the administration and how they had been viewed or reacted to in our individual departments. Although this touching base might have been viewed as a waste of time in the metrics of the consumer-managerialist library as it had no clear output, it whet our appetite and got the reflective juices flowing. It allowed us time to reconnect, to re-establish our relationship with one another and to set the stage for the main course: our Foucault chapter. It was nonetheless gleefully inefficient. Later, after we had finished our close reading, it was time for what was often the most interesting part of the evening. Our conversation would circle back to our current work struggles. We would critically reflect on each other's situations and would often pose each other questions stemming from Foucault's philosophical ideas and politics. We would use what we had just closely read in the chapter to push each other to take the next step in our workplaces, research areas, and career paths. It was weirdly anarchic at times, which made it all the more a departure from our bureaucratic day jobs.

We managed to have quite a lot of fun (which in a work endeavor can be subversive in its own right), to gossip, to swear a solemn oath that if we had to work together for thirty years at York we would strive to support each other, and to feel comfortable with a certain intellectual vulnerability with one another. We were all comfortable with admitting we didn't understand pieces of the text, and we learned how to struggle through it together. Lisa often argued with Bill about Foucault's writing, trying to make the case that language is necessarily complex when you are writing about writing and meta-levels of thinking. She made the case that clear and simple writing sometimes disguises its politics. Bill responded with Foucault parodies: "Its representation lay dormant in the recrudescence of its own finalities,

simultaneously dissolving and coalescing, becoming fluid and solidifying, disappearing from existence while yet fixedly becoming utterly real." Neither ever convinced the other.

What was most important about the reading group was that it was fun, it was supportive, and it was emboldening. The group accommodated disagreement and became a site of sociality and support, as well as a space for intellectual growth. We bonded over food and wine and strange elixirs that appeared from the back of the liquor cabinet late at night, and we pushed each other to open our minds, to debate hard things, to laugh at Foucault and ourselves, and, most importantly, to keep reading. We worked hard to make it a safe space, and the affective consequences of that work are impossible to fully document but crucial nonetheless. This dialogic approach to reading was a much richer experience than reading the text on our own would have been, strengthening our insights not just about the text but about the context in which we were encountering it and each other. We could try out ideas: how might I incorporate a Foucauldian reading of the Library of Congress Classification in a third-year English course? Should a catalog search be like Google? Where is the space for critical dissonance about the search tool in our seemingly kind-hearted and service-minded approach to user interface design? The reading of theory became the backdrop for a dialogue exploring critical praxis in other words, as well as an anchor for building a local community of praxis.

Digesting: Reading as Resistance

Such dialogue was what made our discussions something more than just a reading group trying to figure out a text. We stepped outside of work and began to build a new place for ourselves, whence we could look back at our jobs from a new perspective. It's possible to have this kind of discussion *at* work, but it's a lot easier and much more engaging when done off campus. It's hard to take a critical and honest look at a university library from a meeting room inside it. In a restaurant or someone's home, relaxed, not worrying about being late for another meeting or that someone might think we were wasting time (or that someone might think someone *else* might think we were wasting time), with a book as our foundation, we got down to some serious thinking. Later, with that new perspective still in mind, we took the results back on campus, and all three of us ended up changing the course of our careers. We all realized things had to change, but our methods of resistance were quite different.

For Sarah, the after-dinner discussions often revolved around taking on greater leadership roles in the library. She felt that to promote political

change she needed to enter the arena herself, and the group gave her the confidence that there were others who shared her feelings and ideas and would give her support. She soon took on two leadership roles, one as department head and the other running a major e-learning collaboration with a half-million dollar budget.

Bill reports that the Foucault group did not lead to an ongoing engagement with continental philosophy or a deep understanding of what Foucault actually meant (which, however much he understood then, he has since forgotten). It did help him identify two opposing ways of dealing with the systems we're in: one formal, using rules for our own aims, and the other informal, creative and absurd. He has applied these modes of resistance to his major concerns, which now focus locally on budget cuts and administrative interference at York and globally on climate change and the obliteration of privacy. On the one hand, a way of fighting those problems is through activism and organization, which led him to get involved with the York University Faculty Association. On the other hand, a more personal mode of resistance evolved as he considered how absurd much of our daily situation is. Why are we in those meetings all the time? Why does nothing ever change? Why has no one built on the groundbreaking work of Jason Vance and used actor-network theory to analyse the importance of staplers in libraries?[17] Art is, as always, a way forward, and he began to practice what he calls "performance librarianship."[18] One intervention was at the 2013 HASTAC conference on digital humanities, where Bill, Lisa, and Adam Lauder (the Scott Library Research Chair in E-Librarianship) performed a piece entitled "Digitize and/or Destroy" at the library-hosted conference reception, in which participants selected books and chose to digitize them, destroy them, or both (in either order). An ongoing online performance is STAPLR (Sounds in Time Actively Performing Library Reference), where sonification is used to turn reference desk activity into music. Sonification work has led Bill to develop GHG.EARTH, which turns the current atmosphere carbon dioxide concentration into sound.[19]

Lisa rediscovered her love of reading and talking about ideas, and found that she had not, as she feared, lost the capacity for deep and focused attention. She found herself feeling more intellectually confident than before, enough so to apply to a Ph.D. program in Social and Political Thought. She is now at the dissertation stage, and credits the reading group for both

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17 Jason Vance, "Staplercide! The Lives and Deaths of Academic Library Staplers," *College & Research Libraries News* 74, no. 11 (2013): 570–572, doi:10.5860/crln.74.11.9041.

18 Lisa feels strongly that someone needs to write a theory of performance librarianship.

19 See web sites staplr.org and ghg.earth.

the intellectual path in her work (which includes more Foucault) and for the confidence to get through the first few courses. While doing the Ph.D. she has been on educational leave, and reports that her career as a librarian has basically stalled — but it's a productive stalling, and the Ph.D. will make her a more effective teacher and researcher which she can hopefully bring back to her practice of librarianship. When she guest lectures she weaves in Foucault and others, sometimes explicitly and sometime less so, and talks to students about how the Library of Congress Subject Headings can be understood as a reifications of social norms and disciplinary power structures. She is better able to talk to faculty on their level now, which makes it easier to get buy-in for the kind of projects and teaching she wants to collaborate upon with them. *The Order of Things* was her entry into the practice of critical librarianship.

Sarah chose to stay inside the neoliberal library and try to change it from inside management; Bill is inside but doing what he can to throw sand in the gears one way or another; Lisa stepped outside it for a while and is operating on it from there. For all of us, reading Foucault's book on the order of things brought disorder to our lives, and we like to think he'd appreciate that.

Conclusion: Picking up the Tab

There were costs to our approach and some things we could have done differently. We were glad to be able to make time to read and reflect, and we were very fortunate that we had the means to pay for the restaurant, grocery, and wine bills each month. We recognized (as best we could) our privilege as white, middle-class, straight, full-time librarians with, or in pursuit of, tenure, as we debated high theory over fine food and good wine, but we didn't do much to expand the group's membership. As we progressed with our reading and other colleagues heard about us, we realized there were some who felt excluded from, or even hostile towards, our Foucault group. Looking back, those attitudes make perfect sense. We have asked ourselves what we might have done to be more inclusive and have the kind of conversations we were having with larger more diverse groups of librarians. (A neoliberal formulation of this question would be: "How could we make our group more scalable?") Certainly critiques of the elitism of the jargon of theory are not without merit (although noting that advanced work in any discipline involves jargon and new vocabularies), and engaging with it the way we did, in restaurants and personal spaces, was cliquish. Our attempts to open the group up a little largely failed. Somehow we would get stalled, or stray too far from the readings — we

never really achieved the same intensity of learning when we expanded beyond our three-person dynamic. It requires time to build enough trust to be intellectually vulnerable, particularly with colleagues that one may sometimes skirmish with in the scrum of library operations. Subsequently, we were involved with the development of new and larger reading groups at work, which we think are more inclusive. However, attendance is spotty. More work needs to be done here, including perhaps rethinking what constitutes theory or scholarship and what sort of text or films or works are being discussed in those groups and how conversation is facilitated.

Such expansion is important in our view because we found our group to be empowering and helpful on various levels, and we suspect others might find something similar to be useful (or usefully counter-productive) as well. Through each of our long meals, our group carefully proceeded chapter by chapter, course by course, slowly forming relationships built on shared vulnerability, a common text to anchor our conversations, and a curiosity about each other and the workings of our profession. Our conversations generally expanded beyond classification schemes and into the day-to-day practices of our workplace, the neoliberal university itself, and the sorts of interventions that might be possible. We challenged each other to think about how we might disrupt the various failures of imagination and anti-intellectualism that seemed to govern our everyday work-life. Reading critical theory opened up a dialogue between us and new paths to resistance and critical praxis.

Truthfully, the reading group became a vehicle for much larger affective connections and personal accomplishments than about the specific interrogation of Foucault's ideas. Meeting in our homes brought us even closer together and increased the level of trust between us as we were no longer meeting in the sterile workplace or a public restaurant, but were opening up our domestic lives, making the experience much more humanizing. We cooked for each other, we shared recipes, we talked. If this sounds like a variation of a feminist consciousness-raising circle—well, that's another article waiting to be written, but we acknowledge that praxis at work here.

We have talked at length in this essay about the ways in which reading theory connected to and transformed our practice, but we have not spent much time in this paper discussing Foucault's ideas and how his book was central to this transformation. Perhaps this is also the work of another paper, but it is important to acknowledge that it is not only the act of reading that helped us rethink the anti-intellectualism of libraries or to become politicized: our choice of text was transformative as well. Sarah reports that the text helped her to develop empathy and to realize that there is no real unifying grand order of things. She grew to understand that each person has their

own order based on their experiences, culture, and education and from this they have structured their own knowledge and way of being in the world. She also feels a new comfort with a certain disorder, having abandoned the limiting clarity of a master narrative. For Bill, Foucault's work awakened an awareness in him that we are inside large structures and systems—of politics, language, thought, philosophy, economics, etc.—that we may not realize are there but are shaping us and our world. Lisa's primary insight from the text was an admiration for how Foucault traces the history of the ways in which various disciplines structure knowledge. Specifically, he looks at how those disciplines became increasingly separated from one another over time in the modern university, and how their structurations and separations generate our perceptions of what is true or even what we can think about in the first place. These questions form the basis of her Ph.D. work on the challenges posed by feminist special collections in relation to knowledge production and existing classification schemes.

Our conversations often revolved around these ideas of disciplinarity, truth, knowledge, and memory. That we would often then spin off into how these ideas might relate to our teaching, to how we organize things in libraries and archives, and to how those arrangements impact scholarly knowledge production does not, we hope, diminish the larger insights we gained about society from reading this work. We also do not mean to suggest that critical theory reading groups should have practical applications or that they will always be personally transformative. Rather, we offer our story as one possibility of what a reading group can be and what it can do.

As mentioned, back on campus, no longer feeling the need to hide away, we've initiated more reading groups and this time scheduled them during work hours. They're much more sedate than the Foucault reading group, but small numbers of us meet to think and talk about an article or book and the structures and strictures of our work.[20] This may seem wasteful and unproductive to some colleagues (especially because in its latest manifestation we call it the Slow Scholarship Reading Group), but every announcement of every meeting asserts the point: this is work too. Based on the poor attendance rates, these discussions are apparently of little interest to most of our colleagues, but we persevere. Or perhaps they are of interest, but people are too busy making PowerPoint slides for the

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20 For example, two of the articles we read were Alison Mountz et al., "For Slow Scholarship: A Feminist Politics of Resistance through Collective Action in the Neoliberal University," *ACME International E-Journal for Critical Geographies* 14, no. 4: 1235–59, http://ojs.unbc.ca/index.php/acme/article/view/1058/1141 (whence came the group's name) and David Graeber, "Anthropology and the Rise of the Professional-Managerial Class," *Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 4, no. 3 (2013): 73–88, https://doi.org/10.14318/hau4.3.007.

next meeting or filling out project management templates.[21] We'll invite them and welcome them and keep on trying. It's a small act of resistance, and an enjoyable one.

Perhaps though, given his centrality to this piece, and our changed understanding of our role as librarians and stewards of information which arose through reading his work, we should finish with the words of Foucault, who said, "In any given culture and at any given moment, there is always only one 'episteme' that defines the conditions of possibility of all knowledge, whether expressed in theory or silently invested in a practice."[22]

We ask our readers, if you've made it to the end of the meal, to join us in methodologically reflecting upon the conditions of possibility which govern our practices as librarians and as humans, and, wherever possible, to resist them. Without resistance there will be no change, and in this dangerous world where neoliberal austerity regimes diminish public services and threaten higher education while sea levels rise along with racism, sexism, homophobia, and xenophobia, we must do nothing less than shift the tides.

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21 Or they don't want to sit around talking with the people they know will be there.

22 Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 168.

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