Of all the lands a geographer may visit, there is, perhaps, none so strange as Academia.

Pam Shurmer-Smith, 2000:154

And in the land of Academia, there is, perhaps, none so strange as that of the Faculty of Education—a living topography of the uncanny. The impossibility of teaching depicted by Shoshana Felman (1987), drawing from psychoanalytic theorists Freud and Lacan, assigns an interminable task to the inhabitants of this faculty of Academia. And as we are teaching...
teachers to become teachers, we dwell with doublings of impossibility. So how does a geographer read, write, and map the so strange land of Academia? Marcus Doel (1999) contends, “post-structuralist geography is a driftwork, a wanton abandonment, an active nihilism” (3). What happens when a teaching body at work with geo-literacies and post-structural geography begins to navigate the land of Academia as driftwork? Reading the signs for doing driftwork through what Doel terms “an act, an event, a happening” (11).

And if we read with Derek Gregory and Edward Said, we are already thinking about geographical imaginations in the land of Academia. Attending to the words of Said, we find ourselves located in a struggle over geography:

Just as none of us is outside or beyond geography, none of us is completely free from the struggle over geography. That struggle is complex and interesting because it is not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings.

—Said cited by Gregory, 2000:302

It was in a Human Geography course with Gregory at the University of British Columbia that I was introduced to the work of Edward Said and also to the work of Michel de Certeau. It was in Gregory’s class that I learned about “strange lessons” in deep space—deep space signifying the production of social space. Strange lessons have followed me from the west coast to the nation’s capital, troubling me and getting me into trouble. Drawing now from de Certeau (1992) and his treatise on “Labadie the Nomad” I seek another way of writing, attending to the nomad: “He wrote with his feet, that is, geographically, a story in which his publications, however numerous and voluminous, are only the punctuation, fragments or milestones” (291). Sometimes you need to vacate the premises of the Faculty of Education à pied in order to escape from the soldiers and the can(n)ons to evoke and engage with the struggle with forms and images and imaginings… and then, circling the academic text as a vagabond … to work at staging a border disturbance upon return.

… texts in residence …

Academia is where texts reside. Texts take up quarters in the geography of Academia. They are alive and at work here as driftwork. I draw from Lyotard (1984) on a plurality of driftworks to suggest that texts drift and flow and incite other texts. I turn to geo-literacies in search of a temporary tenancy for the untenured on the tenure track. I do my work in the in-between spaces of the texts that have provoked me and have in-cited radical ways of engaging with pedagogy. Some scholars engage in close readings, in deep readings, in repeated readings. I am often a drifter through texts seeking a word, a punctuated marker, a linguistic shifter, a soundscape to get me through the next impasse. I hungered for books on architecture one night, and that is how Premises happened to arrive. Listen to Denis Hollier (1998) as I script his words into my text. He encountered the word galerist one evening at the dinner table. With “a lexical pause” accompanied by “aesthetic transactions” and “materialist fetishism” Hollier arrives … in this strand of words:

A galerist, according to the translation given in the bilingual dictionary, doesn’t sell. He has a place. He is defined—and defines himself—by his premises.

—1998:49
To have a place in academia—to occupy and be occupied by the premises of academia—defined by premises of a common language. Shurmer-Smith (2000) contends that academics recognize one another through communication in “the same deep academic language” (154). Defining and defined by—always a doubling, and through the doubling perhaps a chance to risk an escape. When the security guards are off duty. During the changing of the guard. I want to refuse definition but it chases after me.

In a small town in the Yukon Territory, just north of the British Columbia border, we would arrive on a Friday afternoon and find a place in front of the log-burning fireplace in the log cabin hotel. We could hear a voice announcing our arrival: Here come the academics. Defined by our premises. To be an academic in this small northern community was to be a schoolteacher. To be an academic in Academia has less resonance. Professor, doctor … tinker, tailor … a geography as driftwork …

… a refugee in Academia … camping out …

The opening citation by Shurmer-Smith works with the entry of Hélène Cixous into Academia—a land where the residents are designated with refugee status:

All of the residents of Academia are naturalized, none was born there, all are refugees from somewhere else, and, like most refugees, they have a simultaneous love and loathing for their new home, a place where their foreignness can suddenly confront them, just as they were feeling settled.

—2000:154

Shurmer-Smith describes Cixous as being both resident and foreigner in Academia—a strange migrant—maintaining a tenuous residency status through constantly stretching language and genre to the “breaking point” (154). And how do we dwell with a simultaneous love and loathing for the premises? A sly spatiality of camping-out that promises so much and yet takes away as it gives. Disrupting categories and boundaries, Cixous does it through writing. Shurmer-Smith attends to Cixous’ “terrifying ability to write placeless space” (155). A refugee must not get too comfortable. Comfort is easily unsettled.

Wrenching words out of context, I want to put them to work anew.

Enter Trinh T. Minh-ha on refugees:

What usually happens in the situation of refugees is that since they do not master the new language, the image they offer to the hegemonic culture has consistently been that of a people who are unable to conceptualize, to have any sophisticated thinking, or even to articulate their own condition.

—1992:172

They do not master the new language and/or they refuse to master the tools of the master. Trinh (1989) shares with her readers the difficulty of exceeding what is recognizable scholarly writing. Academic freedom struggles with high definition. Alterity confronted with security guards seeks an alternate route. My academic language arrived late. In the stage of oldwomanhood, and was corrupted along the way. Drawn into marginal spatiality. Some of my colleagues would laugh when I made reference to spatiality. They would laugh
at the names of the scholars that I cited. Wrote smudge-pot on the graffiti tablets offered to passers-by at my place at the research fair. My readings in human geography disorient me. Pedagogy has never been the same—now fraught with fault-lines, tectonic plates and a colonial presence. I am unable to speak the standard dialect of Academia. The dialect that holds the power. Standards elude me. Benchmarks horrify me. I remain speechless on rubrics. I have been contaminated by Hélène Cixous and Trinh T. Minh-ha. Grateful to have been educed into their schools of writing—their schools of no return. As an assistant professor I don’t know who I am supposed to be assisting—perhaps my ‘selves’ through a passage. And I have never wanted to profess. Engaging in literacy with Bronwyn Williams (2006) how do we trouble the hegemony of identity papers? As one amasses the dossier of identity papers in the request for a passport, the multiple subjectivities of a passeur must negotiate Said’s struggle with ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings …

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… pedagogic passings …

I have only begun to recognize the complexities of the colonization mechanisms in the Land of Academia. As professors colonized by the institution, we colonize our students who are eager to perform on their students what has been done to them. There are those who refuse the colonization process and who return from practicum shattered by what they see happening to children. This is a gap that is still alive and this is where the work must be done. Not to close the gap but to work in the gap. To work in the space of the wound.

A reading arrives as an act, an event, a happening … as an aftershock …

My journal alert system re-appears mysteriously one day following a long absence and I
encounter an article by John W. Phillips (2006) on failure and the deconstruction of the teaching body. In the so strange land of Academia, a geographer now encounters a teaching body and, if we continue to read with Phillips, the deconstruction of a teaching body. It is uncanny how titles appear unexpectedly seducing a reader passing by. I want to read Cixous with Phillips, both of whom read with Derrida. Words at work as arrivals and departures.

Phillips evokes as his motif the concept of passage “as the nexus … of great difficulties” (27). Listen to the nexus of passage as it begins to do its work:

It simultaneously signals the problem of passing, a process of going ahead or being drawn forwards, and the pass, the trace or pace (a step or track), a distance or interval that implies a way through otherwise insurmountable obstacles.

—2006:27

Phillips speaks of a “pedagogic passing” … fraught with obstacles and dangers …

The most grueling pass I have ever negotiated was the Chilkoot Pass north of 60—at the end of a four-year teaching position in the Yukon Territory and prior to going south to begin an MA program at UBC. Rolling my car on a hairpin turn on the gravel road to Skagway… trying to meet the midnight deadline at the border crossing between Canada and the US … was a near-death experience but also one that worked to fuel the passage through torrential rainfall and deep mud and the steep slope of the golden steps of the 49-ers … a swerve on the way… and the teaching body survives the pass …

Listen to Phillips:

Such a pass might very well save the lonely wanderer or any sizable group from certain hazards (a phalange forms behind the guide who knows the pace from repeated passage); a pass avoids the chances they would otherwise have taken, the risks of a dead end, an impasse or sudden abyss.

—2006:27

I don’t like tour groups. I don’t want to follow a guide. Group membership evades me. Nor does commensurability agree with me. Sometimes that is when you need to return to reading [with] Shoshana Felman. Sun, Peretz and Baer, the editors of a Shoshana Felman Reader (2007) contend that with Felman’s creation, “even at moments of impasse,” a text can generate new meaning (3). Felman’s pedagogy drawing from Lacan proposes a teaching of nonknowledge. Doel (1999), drawing from Deleuze, insists “one never becomes alone, but only on the outskirts of a pack” (171). Passing then, on the outskirts of the group or the pack, has its own set of dangers. I get distracted from the movement of the phalange by the swerves by the detours. Seeking signs for getting lost.

Such a pass, however, would also be exposed to ambush or robbery. The artifice of obstruction that a module in a teaching syllabus represents would thus also include the passes (checkpoints, borders, frontiers and guardhouses) that provide access, rights of passage, a right to philosophy.

—Phillips, 2006: 27
Words chase [after] me—following me into meetings—hunting me down. Words behaving as fox hounds—barking in hard metal. Metal locks appear on the doors safeguarding the premises. Security remains [un]compromised. The norm[al] for security always a doubling. Writers of words can be insecure. I need to read my way into a paper. I am unable to write on my own. Academia insists that one writes on one’s own. Or to be the first author in a geographic mapping of names. And yet, to collaborate. Strange lessons in deep space.

My work is measured by first-ness of geographical position in an alignment of names. You are informed that there are no funds for you because you have not been first author for a grant in the last three years. The numerals ‘1’ and ‘3’ have become signifying gatekeepers—monetary bankers. You are designated as an established scholar but you are also a failure. Is this an ambush or a robbery? Is there a difference? In the letter that informs me that I will not be funded for a conference presentation, I am designated as an “established researcher” who, nevertheless, will not be funded. The gatekeepers are at work to undermine the security system of establishment. A mentor informs me that working in a corporate university is like working in a second-hand car lot where the salesperson with the fewest sales pays a fine or is dismissed. And so a galerist in the corporate world of Academia is after all defined by the sales. Foucault’s notions of discipline and punishment are alive and well in Academia. As I am trafficking in hybrid transport, perhaps there is yet a future to come. Dealing in hybrid vehicles I may be on to something.

My premises are becoming insecure. I am not as “established” as one might think. Is this what Jacques Derrida (1998) might mean to be a performative contradiction? Theory takes on new life in the so strange land of Academia. Wigley (1994) claims, “secure housing is the greatest risk of deconstructive discourse” (210). Listen to his “domesticity of the proper” with deconstruction at work to “identify structural flaws, cracks in the construction that have been systematically disguised, not in order to collapse these structures, but on the contrary, to demonstrate the extent to which structures depend on both these flaws and the way they are disguised” (207). Declared settled, security must be undermined.

… words as ambush predators …

Words pass too … they pass in-between … they pass out … perhaps from lack of oxygen in the pass … high altitudes … steep slopes … words can detonate … and words can be ambush predators.

Certainly one expects difficulties in the pass but when the going is green and things are unfolding as they should be, the unsuspecting traveler forgets to be wary when the path leads through fields of green. My first request by a student to be a supervisor was evoked through excitations with theorists, theories and lived experience. I had thought this was a step in the pass through the passage … the way … as it should be … a member of a phalange forms behind the guide who knows the pace from repeated passage. You have arrived to offer a feast of words and readings and someone has responded. But as Phillips warns us … an ambush awaits in unexpected places. We all get flattered, I am told, when a student wants to work with us. Flattery has connotations of a misrepresentation of insincerity. You walk away with a sticky residue of a word at work as an ambush predator.

I learned with my primary students that the praying mantis is a master of camouflage, a master of mimesis, as it sways with the wind in the green leaves on the branch. As we did our research on the praying mantis, we found out that the praying mantis was an ambush
predator. With a morbid fascination, my students and I, as voyeurs, would take our magnifying glasses and watch a cricket being eaten alive, limb-by-limb, while held in the grasp of the praying claws of the mantis. My primary classroom activities are transported to the land of Academia. To a patchwork of words at work as ambush predators. A newly arrived refugee in Academia, one expects a difficult pass and but as one begins the transport from student to teacher I become entangled in the stickiness of flattery. Could it be that I now have a morbid fascination with watching my ‘self’ disappear …limb by limb … but with a hope for the possibilities of re-generation …

Humiliation becomes another reading experience. Ted Aoki teaches us that humiliation is related to humility and to humus. Humiliation returns me to the earth. Humiliation settles around my shoulders as comfortably as the silk Afghani shawl in exquisite shades of green purchased in support of the women of Afghanistan. Humiliation settles into the cocoons of silkworms, which have a text of their own … a text at work …

…excellence as an empty signifier …

Perhaps the most difficult impasse is that articulated by Bill Readings (1996) as his purpose in writing *The University in Ruins* … an attempt to think his way out of “an impasse between militant radicalism and cynical despair” (5). It’s a treacherous impasse that may have no way out. Readings exposed repeatedly the emptiness of the signification of *excellence* insisting that “the University of Excellence serves nothing other than itself, another corporation in a world of transnationally exchanged capital” (43). According to Readings, “Excellence draws only one boundary: the boundary that protects the unrestricted power of the bureaucracy” (33).

There are those who passed when we needed them most—leaving behind a legacy of signs and signposts for getting us into trouble in their absence. We lost Readings in a plane crash in 1994. Perhaps we need to take responsibility for continuing to work with him in that ambivalent impasse. My concern is that an abundance of excellence masks the messy murky spaces in which difference is at work. The geography of excellence is fraught with hard metal soundscapes.

As in Antoine de Saint-Exupéry’s *Le Petit Prince*, when a young boy draws a snake that has just consumed an elephant, excellence has a shape. The shape of what it has swallowed. If the young boy were to be awarded for excellence, would he be awarded for the drawing of the elephant or the snake—or would his chef-d’oeuvre be le chapeau—the hat? Excellence becomes the shape of consumption when one has been eaten alive by the institution.

Phillips (2006) drawing from Hegel contends that the university offers two kinds of knowledge. The first is “a promise (and therefore a threat)” of reading the signs correctly to uncover some kind of “hidden essence.” The second is the “image of knowledge” which works at relentlessly betraying the first kind of knowledge with a series of “prosthetic aids (study guides, short introductions, web sites, activities) that are aimed at helping the student pass” (31). Reading with Derrida, Phillips alerts us to “a monstrous form of a knowledge of the third kind” that performs the failure of the other kinds. Strangely, he contends that you cannot pass a course in this third kind of knowledge “but possibly you can fail” (39). Phillips contends that the “failure of the university to speak of itself manifests an institution of failure that has no corresponding notion of passing” (29).

Even my doubting “self” can realize that a recruitment package must speak to excellence and innovation but when one begins to do the work—to labour in the field of education,
can we not acknowledge the difficult work that is yet to be done. For de Certeau’s nomad, “Traces of the soil through which he passed stuck to his shoes” (1992, 290). Labouring in the field can be dirty work.

Rules have a life of their own. Rules have a historical narrative. Rules tell [on] you. Read the ministry documents and learn the definitions in the glossary because there are no conversations here. And yet, reading, according to Shoshana Felman, is a pass to incompleteness. The “and” marks the blind spot. How can I learn to dwell nearby my own blind spot(s)? To dwell in that impasse that abyss that Phillips refers to in the deconstruction of the teaching body. Listen to Felman: “It is through a loss of sense, and not through an increase in sense, that the subject undergoes his own inscription into a text” (Sun, Peretz & Baer, 2007, 91). I continue to circle the text à pied.

... a footbridge in the impasse ...

As soon as my fingers began gathering my materials, my notebooks, glasses, umbrella, my feet had no choice but to follow suit. And soon I was downloading maps and heading west, walking over the footbridge across the canal, in pursuit of French. I dropped out of French class today and took to the streets of Ottawa in search of another way of learning language. I had managed to escape a room with no windows, the conjugations of verbs, and a run-on story about a tic and a dog, and soon I was dwelling on a bridge with a magnificent view of the imposing gothic architecture of the parliament buildings and the turrets of the Chateau Laurier. And one begins again to write with one’s feet picking up a little dust a little dirt along the way ... another paragraph to bring a paper to a temporary halt. And another punctuation mark. It works.

I have come to a temporary understanding that it is not about learning a second language; it is about negotiating the impasses. The uncanny moment arrives when we are startled by the ways in which institutions of learning halt the very act of learning. Sometimes we need to walk away from words in both official languages. To walk away from an ambush. I have been told that one would go out of one’s way to avoid me if I spoke my imperfect French. I have been asked why the university is paying for a French tutor for an old woman. A violent lesson in language teaches me what is meant by a passive knowledge of French. No trespassing.

... riding the wake of creepiness ...

Avital Ronell (2007), reading with Jean-François Lyotard, startles her readers with conceptions of the creepiness of childhood drawing from the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac and proceeding to the unrelenting creepiness that lives on in the everyday life of schooling praxis. Ronell is a brilliant scholar, coursing through deconstruction and psychoanalysis to unsettle her readers. Listen:

Much can be said about the induction of wild children, savages, idiots, and infants into the realm of philosophical speculation, and it would be important to investigate more fully the peculiar yet crucial status of these minorities as philosophy conducts its adult raids.

—2007:139

Adult raids on the lives of children ... sometimes we need to be shocked into listening. Ronell contends, “the child constitutes a security risk for the house of philosophy. It crawls
in, setting off a lot of noise” (140). The figure of the child, Ronell contends, “enters or is entered into, the places where speech falters and language chokes in the throat of a political body” (140). How does pedagogy collaborate with philosophy, becoming complicit for the mise en demeure of homeland security? And how responsible are we as educators in perpetuating this security risk? Caught up in the trafficking of discursive praxis between ministry dictations, colleges of teachers, school board authorities and academic ministrations, how do we slip past the traffic cops and security guards to respond to Ronell’s provocation that the “irrevocable creepiness of childhood is the place from which an ethical call is placed” (141).

Shifting from the unrelenting creepiness of childhood to the test drive, Ronell (2005) tells us that when “the ego senses that something may be missing; it becomes insecure and must start up the machinery of testing” (70). Our homeland security seems to depend upon those scores that our children as students attain in those international testing systems. Testing systems sweep over the geography of childhood in a massive raid. Ronell (2005) in The Test Drive exposes the test site as a homestead of being-not-at-home. The test site as one of many performative contradictions of Academia. We expose our insecurity using the test scores of our children to contain the homeland security of Ego.

… incendiary matchbooks …

I poach the word matchbook from a title by David Wills (2005) to create a few sparks with Sam Weber (2005) who warns us about the militarization of our thinking troubling our attention to “targets” of opportunity. Targeting, as envisioned by Weber, is an effort to overcome our vulnerability to the workings of chance. We work at evading the truth of our own precarious condition. Phillips’ notion of the passage has us labouring with our precarious condition. If we were to attend to our complicity in creepiness, what then? The complications become messy and murky. Deborah Britzman, as a guest speaker in Ted Aoki’s class at UBC in the summer of ’95, told us that we could only learn to do less harm. She set off sparks. Her words were stunning then and continue to resonate as I find myself increasingly entangled in the Academic Text that conducts raids on children. I work in the wake of an unrelenting creepiness. When I find myself retreating from the very difficulty of the passage, I seek refuge in the Text, seeking a pulse for moving on.

Ronell is reading [with] Lyotard and I am reading in-between caught up in the traces of Mainmise—from the French main and mettre. I get snagged by French words and caught up in the trappings they set in the impasse of the text and sometimes I don’t want to escape. Handheld by Ronell and Lyotard, I am re-assured even as they de-construct my teaching body. A space for in-dwelling with difference. I have a morbid curiosity to see what might happen to me when I let go of the hand that holds … mainmise …

… a symptom of pathology …

I went recently to see Sato Makoto’s documentary film on Edward Said at the National Library Archive. What lingers with me from the film is the notion of Said having a border identity. Is it possible that I might have the symptoms of a border identity in the Land of Academia? Is this a pathology? Like borderline personality disorder. And, if so, I will have to work on enjoying my symptoms with Slavoj Žižek. Try finding Žižek in Education! Like finding Waldo! Only in a study group by candlelight with incense burning in an art gallery on Hastings Street in Vancouver. Sometimes I think my degree came from Spartacus Book Store in Vancouver and now I am doing a post-doctorate in the nation’s capital … at Octopus Books in the Glebe. I have been tempted to vacate the premises of Academia.
before I am evicted or evacuated but I can’t resist the lure of the impasse.

… situation normal …

Sometimes footsteps come your way. The Canada Post van has just stopped out front. One of today’s arrivals is from the Pamphlet Architecture series [21] entitled Situation Normal … you learn to look for signs that may offer a sliding out of the text of Academia. Listen to the opening words:

Coined during the early years of World War II, the acronym snafu—a condensation of the phrase “situation normal all fucked up”—was used by American soldiers to describe a condition of disorder created by an excess of conflicting Army rules and regulations. Absorbed into vernacular speech, its profanity largely forgotten, the term snafu now signifies a general state of confusion, disruption, and system breakdown.

—P. Lewis, M. Tsurmaki & D. Lewis, 1998:4

The authors suggest that a snafu disrupts flow and can create a traffic jam … an impasse or possibly an ambush. An aporia, perhaps. And here we hitch a ride once again on a rhizome with Michel de Certeau returning to that human geography class at UBC with Derek Gregory. Shifting, across centuries, from the time of the mystics and the nomad who wrote geographically with his feet to everyday tactics, working in the liminal passage of the impasse with Bill Readings “between militant radicalism and cynical despair.”

I have been trying to find a heartbeat in Academia—a pulse in the impasse. I took to following Friday’s footprints in the snow to Cinema-Politica during the past academic year. A graduate student introduced me to the event, which offers a provocative documentary film followed by a post-film discussion with a vibrant crosspatch of university and community members. Cinema-Politica happens on campuses in multiple international sites. This year the university has decided not to provide accommodation for the event:

The University of Ottawa is unable to grant such a request [for a room] since, by failing to provide interpretive services at its events as required by the Ontario Human Rights Code, Cinema Politica did not respect all applicable statutes, regulations and University of Ottawa policies in its use of University’s facilities in 2007-2008.

—Cited by Jesse Freeston

The university was unwilling to fund an interpreter and now tries to shut down the event because of the lack of interpretive sign-language services. I wrote a letter to support the request for interpretive services. There was no response. … snafu …

Of course, the story as syndrome has multiple complications, but isn’t that why we are here: To engage with difficult reads? Cinema-Politica has now become Cinema Academica in newly found premises on campus. With symptoms of a weakened pulse, but living on. And while Žižek (2001) advises us to enjoy our symptoms, it is not so easy. Your symptoms can get you into a lot of trouble.

On the tenure track, I found my ‘self’ questioning why I wanted what I didn’t want. What
do I want with wanting? In the writing, I am returned to the seduction of the impossible—the abyss—the impasse—the ambush—and lured by the unrelenting propensity for horror in Vidler’s space of the void—for terror in Cixous’ placeless space. I have had to write my way toward the impasse attending to Phillips and his monstrous form of a third kind of knowledge.

Dwelling with the possibility of a failure and with the impossibility of passing, a border identity works with the pathological symptoms of a housing problem in Academia. Strange lessons through Doel’s diabolical art of spatial science ... driftwork.

And one day, inevitably, a letter arrives in my mailbox with a message for me: Tenure deferred. A vagabond begins again to circle the academic text provoking à pied in a placeless space … living on in Derrida’s différence as a doubling of difference and deferral …

Resources


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Pat Palulis, teaches in the Faculty of Education at the University of Ottawa. Her research interests tarry within the marginal topographies of language, literacy, culture and spatiality.