

Reading to Decolonize. “On Reading Actively” (spring 2020)

Having read in groups together for a couple of years now, Richard and I have discovered quite a bit about what kinds of reading tend to generate the most productive exchanges. We like to emphasize that the most useful kind of reading is a reading that is active, rather than passive. This could mean any number of things: perhaps you are an active reader when you underline/highlight a text, perhaps you are an active reader when you circle quotes or write them out by hand, perhaps you are an active reader when you read sections of a text to your lover/friend/family member/dog, perhaps you look things up, perhaps you make connections with other things you've read/heard/watched. Any version of this kind of engagement will up the level of the conversations we'll be having, so, to whatever extent is possible for you in these extraordinary times, we encourage you to dive deep into these texts, surfacing with their myriad treasures in hand. Ultimately, our goal is to hold space for the text and for each other. Active reading will also be an active listening to the text; once we meet, it will also be an active listening to each other.

A caveat, though: while some of you may find yourselves capable of a new level of concentration these days, others of you may find yourselves more harried than ever by the news, your kids, worry for the world, a new state of financial uncertainty, etc. If deep concentration is something you can do for yourself and for us, wonderful; if you can't, we welcome you all the more, since those of you who can read deeply will be able to share your discoveries with those who can't.

In thinking about reading, I find it useful to remember that reading, before the invention of the printing press, reading was a public activity. Low levels of literacy and exorbitantly priced books limited their circulation so that "reading" meant listening to someone read a text to you. It's perhaps nice to keep that in mind as we prepare to share our reading experiences with each other. Reading in this sense has three basic moments, or movements:

1. **Citing**, in which you draw our attention to a line, paragraph or page, reading aloud something that struck you, but telling us where you found it so that we can read with you.
2. **Paraphrasing**, in which we say what we hear in the text (or in each other's comments) using our own words, so that the group can know precisely what we are talking about. As a result of a successful paraphrase, the rest of us should be in a position to recognize the text in question, and the author of the text could agree that this is what the text says.
3. **Resonating**, in which we go on to say something about the text (or a group member's comment): how we found it surprising, interesting, evocative, compelling, inspiring, etc. This is where we tend to reach out beyond the text in question in any number of directions (though not too far afield), towards other texts we have read together, towards things that others in the group have said, and ideally towards our evolving sense of what colonialism and decolonization mean.