



# Qualifying Differently: Reflecting on an Alternative Approach to Doctoral Comprehensive Exams

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## Abstract

In this paper, we build on critical scholarship calling for a care revolution in geography by examining the comprehensive/qualifying exam (QE) process as a moment of intervention. In North America, aspiring doctoral candidates are typically expected to pass a QE before beginning their research. The way QEs are traditionally designed and implemented in the field of geography reinforces a particular canon and a certain way of being a geographer that excludes diverse knowledges. Doctoral students often experience preparing for and completing these exams as a specifically stressful and isolating period. Such an approach to QEs limits geography's potential as a caring discipline. From our positions as a doctoral student and PhD supervisor, we use collaborative autoethnography to explore an alternative QE format. To better understand the potential of alternative QEs to support doctoral education in geography, we bring literature on QEs into conversation with feminist geography literature on care and academia, exploring the educational possibilities of practicing QEs in a way aligned with a caring academic praxis. Rather than being viewed as a rigorous and individualized test focused on creating 'expert geographers,' we suggest the discipline thinks about QEs as a process that encourages scholars to practically and

relationally engage with diverse ways of knowing. Despite its potential, doing QEs differently within an uncaring university system can be challenging. It requires a great deal of relational care work to be done well. In conclusion, we consider how geographers might begin to practice QEs differently in order to imagine the discipline, and academia, otherwise.

## Keywords

doctoral education, qualifying examination, caring university, feminist geography

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## An Introduction to the Doctoral Qualifying Exam

In North America, aspiring doctoral candidates in geography and related disciplines are typically expected to pass comprehensive or qualifying exams (QEs) before beginning their dissertation research. The QE has been described as a key moment in doctoral education both as an assessment and form of academic socialization (Guloy et al. 2020; Kostohryz 2016); however, there is no national framework for QE assessments in Canada or the USA, with QEs varying across institutions (McLaughlin et al. 2024; Guloy et al. 2020). Traditionally, they require students to engage with disciplinary theory through a set of prescribed or carefully selected readings followed by a time-limited written component and oral examination. A committee of faculty evaluates the student's written work and then, during an oral exam, committee members ask the student questions about their work and disciplinary knowledge. Finally, the committee determines whether the student passes and can move on to other elements of the PhD (usually, independent research).

Increasingly, research on students' experiences of the QE has raised concerns with the way it is practiced, and with the potential outcomes. A primary concern is with QE content, which can reinforce a certain canon as *the* discipline, excluding diverse voices and ways of knowing outside of Anglo-American, white, hetero-masculinist categories (Kincaid and Fritzsche 2022; Oswin 2020; Mott and Cockayne 2017). There are also concerns related to the structure of QEs. As high-stakes exams that students prepare for over months, often in isolated and competitive conditions, QEs breed individualism and are documented to produce anxiety, stress, and poor mental-health amongst students (Sverdlik and Hall 2020). These concerns leave educational scholars calling for more research questioning the implicit assumptions of traditional QE approaches, exploring alternative assessment formats (e.g. application-based exams like applying theories to a case example or creating a research portfolio), and considering students' lived experiences with the process (Capello 2023; Fisher et al. 2020; Guloy et al. 2020; Stewart-Wells and Keenan 2020).

In this paper, we meet this call, focusing specifically on the educational possibilities of reimagining the QE process in the discipline of geography, and on our lived-experiences as feminist geographers with an alternative QE format that centred care through practical application and relational engagement. To do so, we use collaborative autoethnography to illuminate our joint and relational experiences as a doctoral student and academic supervisor engaged in an alternative QE process. The alternative QE we describe throughout this paper did not follow the traditional process of a student reading a prescribed material list and defending their expertise on the canon through essay writing and oral defense. Instead it included collaboratively generating and engaging with a list of academic and non-academic

materials (e.g. podcasts, community reports); doing a series of practical activities (e.g. hosting a community conversation, running a workshop for our feminist research team, and creating a zine (i.e. mini-magazine) about the process); writing critical reflections that bridged theory and practice; and completing a student-designed oral assessment. Beyond the specific alternative structure of the QE, for us doing QEs differently also refers to a process centred on a caring academic praxis which emphasizes knowing through practice, within relationships, across difference, and from embodied emotions.

To explore the educational possibilities and our lived experiences of practicing an alternative QE, in what follows we bring literature on QEs into conversation with literature that explores academia through the lens of care. Specifically, we review the work of feminist geographers that engages with the possibilities of enacting a caring academic praxis within the 'uncaring university.' We then expand on the methods we used to conduct this collaborative autoethnography and present our shared story through a series of reflexive vignettes. Next, we highlight the findings illustrated through this narrative, arguing that geographers should reimagine QEs as a process focused on practically and relationally engaging with diverse ways of knowing, rather than a test focused on creating 'experts' and reproducing disciplinary knowledge and particular ways of being in academia.

### **The Uncaring University and Why Alternative Qualifying Exams Matter in Geography**

The term 'uncaring university' is used to refer to academic systems that are structured by and perpetuate colonialism, heteropatriarchy, racism, ableism, neoliberalism, and other forms of oppression. Through various socio-cultural processes, such as prioritizing quantity over quality, individualism over collectives, and disembodied logic over lived experiences and emotions, the uncaring university causes harm to its members' wellbeing, while reproducing a university that is white, hetero-masculine, and able-bodied (Hawkins and Kern 2024; Bartos 2021; Hawkins et al. 2014).

As described by feminist geographers a caring academic praxis works to subvert these effects by centering principles of collaboration, equity, and care; taking seriously emotions, bodies, and relations; and accounting for unequal structures of power and their everyday manifestations (e.g., Bartos 2021; Wood et al. 2020; Smyth et al. 2020). In their "Manifesto of Radical Care in Geography" Dowler et al. (2019, 35), articulate a care praxis in geography, explaining that it "demands geographers move beyond recognition into action, actively working to infuse radical care into our everyday interpersonal interactions and into our departmental, institutional, and disciplinary policies and practices." This requires that we collectively develop new practices and ways of interacting in geography which develop a culture of care and resist systemic discrimination, precarity, and ableist standards. Among many other practices, this involves accounting for emotional and embodied experiences of academia (Taylor and Lahad 2018; Wood et al. 2020); taking a slow approach to scholarship (Mountz et al. 2015); and creating feminist collectives and spaces within the university (Smyth et al. 2020). What is clear across this scholarship is the radical potential of "small actions and everyday practices" to dismantle existing power structures and imagine and create alternative academic futures (Smyth et al. 2020, 854).

In this paper, we respond to Dowler et al.'s (2019) call to infuse a radical care praxis into all facets of geography, by turning our attention to the QE as a potential and understudied site of transformation. In doing so, we are not suggesting that all geography

departments carry out doctoral QEs in an uncaring way. In fact, we have heard of instances where positive changes have been made to how QEs have been traditionally practiced (e.g. students collaborating with supervisors to create reading lists or departments extending timelines for completing the exam). However, we have more frequently heard about and experienced QEs where geographers felt particularly uncared for in the process. Like Cannon (2020, 47), this has led us to wonder “how students and professors might intra-act differently with [QEs] to produce differently,” specifically how infusing care in geography’s QE process might contribute to creating a more caring discipline.

Doctoral QEs have many purported benefits. Across disciplines these exams are understood as providing an important assessment of a doctoral student’s ability to conduct research, think critically, display their knowledge, and communicate and synthesize literature (Guloy et al. 2020; Kostohryz 2016). QEs are also viewed as a way to develop writing, research, and verbal skills; build community within a doctoral cohort; support academic socialization; and construct scholarly identities (Cannon 2020; Guloy et al. 2020). Despite these benefits, we have heard countless ‘horror stories’ of QEs practiced in uncaring ways, alongside “advice on how to survive” this process (Cannon 2020, 38).

Research highlights many concerns, including that QEs reinforce dominant understandings of what knowledge and whose bodies and voices belong in academia (McAdams and Robertson 2012). While limited relevant literature exists specifically about QEs in geography (see Wood 2015), there is a great deal of work critiquing the lack of diversity in literature, knowledge production, and people engaged in the discipline. Geography “remains overwhelmingly dominated by white, male, cisnormative-heterosexual voices and by a narrow set of epistemological approaches” (Mott and Cockayne 2017, 955). As explained by Oswin, this “marginalization, dismissal and erasure of ‘others’ and their/our epistemologies” works to “stifle the critical geographical imagination [...]” (2020, 13), limiting the relevance of the discipline more widely.

In their analysis of syllabi from graduate-level ‘Introduction to geography’ courses in the USA, Kinkaid and Fritzsche (2022) found courses often reproduced dominant and triumphant histories of the discipline - for example, ignoring its colonial and racist history and present and minimizing or excluding contributions by women, Indigenous, racialized, and queer people. The authors explain that “the canon exists as a shared disciplinary imaginary, and the syllabus documents and operationalizes that imaginary” (2022, 6). Similarly, the QE acts as a gatekeeping mechanism for geography, including through the creation of disciplinary reading lists. As Mott and Cockayne remind us, “careful and conscientious citation is important because the choices we make about whom to cite - and who is then left out of the conversation - directly impact the cultivation of a rich and diverse discipline, and the reproduction of geographical knowledge itself” (2017, 955). A careful citational practice can be unattainable in QEs where supervisors or departments provide students with a predetermined reading list or strongly suggest certain authors as required. As Cannon (2020, 39) states, such an approach can promote students becoming ‘experts’ in a field that is “finite and linear” rather than dynamic and evolving.

Although students are increasingly entering doctoral programs with varied skillsets, lived experiences, and career goals, over the years little has changed in how QEs are designed and practiced (Capello 2023). The standard practice of students reading for months, writing academic essays in high-pressure situations, and defending their knowledge

in a combative/debate-style oral defense reinforces masculinist, colonial, ableist, and neoliberal ways of being in the academy (see Hawkins and Kern 2024). Rather than a useful pedagogical tool for potential geographers, QEs often function as a rite of passage and academic gatekeeping, preserving disciplinary and sociocultural power and privilege within existing hierarchies (Capello 2023). We are critical of the narrow approaches to disciplinary knowledge that traditional QEs produce in geography.

Like the neoliberal university more broadly, which “requires high productivity in compressed time frames” (Mountz et al. 2015, 1236), traditional QEs have been critiqued for promoting unrealistic notions of productivity and expertise (Cannon 2020). Doctoral students have reported the lowest levels of wellbeing, motivation, and self-efficacy during their QEs (Sverdlik and Hall 2020), with detrimental effects to their confidence and scholarly identities (Capello 2023). These negative outcomes are often attributed to the high-stakes consequences, the exam format, and the breadth of content examined (Cannon 2020; Capello 2023). According to education scholars, these practices are not aligned with pedagogical best practice for determining students’ understanding of content or with a holistic approach to education (Stewart-Wells and Keenan 2020).

This literature reflects the impacts the uncaring university can have on aspiring geographers (Bartos 2021). As a system, it perpetuates unrealistic imaginaries of academics as ‘lone experts’ and ignores our inherent interdependencies, the care work that makes our scholarship possible, and the relational production of our knowledge. The work of feminist geographers read alongside literature about experiences of the QE provides poignant examples of how the uncaring university plays out for doctoral students. This encourages us to join others (e.g. Cannon 2020; Shields 2015) to push back against the type of academia and academic subject traditional QE processes construct and explore the possibilities of alternative QEs as a way to enact a caring academic praxis in geography doctoral programs.

## **A Collaborative Autoethnography of Qualifying Differently**

### ***About the Co-Authors***

In this paper, we detail our experience as feminist geographers with an alternative QE during which we attempted to enact a caring academic praxis. Following the approach of Adams-Hutcheson and Johnston (2019), we begin by sharing details about our relationship as well as our positionalities and how we are differently situated in the university. We do so while acknowledging that these details provide only a snapshot of who we are, our identities and privileges, and how we have/continue to relate with one another.

Amy: At the time we write this paper, I am a doctoral candidate in my third year of an interdisciplinary PhD program, having just completed my QE. I am a feminist geographer and community-based researcher, whose research focuses on care in community contexts such as mutual aid groups and the non-profit sector. Roberta is my doctoral supervisor, as well as my mentor, collaborator, and friend. We have worked together since 2012 when she hired me for my first research position as an undergraduate student. Throughout the years, we have come to know each other well, including each other’s families, and have spent time together beyond the university. I continually rely on Roberta for emotional support and guidance.

Roberta: I am currently the Director of the interdisciplinary program Amy is enrolled in, as well as an Associate Professor with a tenured, permanent position in a geography

department. As a feminist geographer, I research ethical consumption, political ecology, and feminist academia. Amy has been a part of my research team on almost every project I have done since 2012; in fact, she was the first research assistant I hired. Although I technically trained Amy in many ways, including as her course instructor and supervisor, I have also learned a lot from her. Together, we have co-authored articles and co-led grants and a research group. I am happy to say that we have also become friends.

We acknowledge that there are many institutional and intersectional power dynamics that have influenced our doctoral student-PhD supervisor relationship (Adams-Hutcheson and Johnston 2019). As the Program Director, Roberta plays an active role in shaping the requirements that Amy must meet to achieve her degree; she was on the committees responsible for approving Amy's QE proposal and determining whether she passed the exam. Additionally, our academic successes and careers are interdependent through our collaborative work - such as grants, research projects, workshops, etc. As feminist geographers who depend on one another, we have endeavored to centre a feminist ethic of care in our relationship by practicing collaboration, reciprocity, and transparency. We believe this has enabled our student-supervisor relationship to flourish (see Adams-Hutcheson and Johnston (2019) for more on care and mentorship in this context).

### *Our Experiences with Qualifying Exams*

As a feminist geographer, who has been in the field for over a decade, Roberta has witnessed many QEs in several geography departments across North America. Her own QE as a doctoral student at Clark University in Massachusetts, USA, involved students selecting three sub-fields of geography (e.g. political ecology, feminist geography) and creating reading lists of academic books and articles under each. While the lists were not pre-determined, faculty supervisors strongly recommended that students include readings from 'the canon' of geography, which built on the lists of previous cohorts. Overtime, this resulted in the reproduction of similar reading lists, engaging with a specific selection of authors. After reading and studying for months in isolation, Roberta's QE culminated in a 20-minute oral presentation and 3-hour oral exam. These oral exams were known to be antagonistic and stories of faculty 'debating' (or often bullying) students as part of the process were common. Even though Roberta's advisory committee was supportive, and her oral exam went smoothly, her QE experience was one of loneliness, stress-related illnesses, and an inescapable feeling of anxiety. Since then, Roberta has evaluated many QEs in the geography department where she works; however, Amy's QE was the first experience for both of us with an alternative QE format.

In this paper, we focus on Amy's QE in the Social Practice and Transformational Change program, a new interdisciplinary doctoral program at the University of Guelph, a mid-sized publicly funded university in Ontario, Canada. Despite having completed her Masters' degree in geography, Amy decided to enrol in an interdisciplinary program for her PhD largely due to the flexibility the program offered in QE and research design. Although this QE took place in an interdisciplinary program, as feminist geographers we use our experience with this alternative format as an opportunity to consider how QEs might be done differently in geography, a discipline we are both rooted in.

In this interdisciplinary program, students consult with their advisory committee to develop a QE proposal that states their overall learning goals through the QE process. The

proposal is comprised of: (1) a material list, which can include academic and non-academic written, oral, and visual sources; (2) an overview of how they will engage with the material (e.g. independently, through practical application, in collaboration with others, etc.); (3) a list of what students will submit to the examining committee (e.g. artwork, a draft article, a course outline, reflective papers, a short film, essays in response to examiner questions); and (4) a plan for their interactive oral exam, outlining specific details like whether students will do a traditional or creative presentation, or none at all, and how the question and answer portion of the exam will be organized (e.g. student receives questions ahead of time, roundtable discussion etc.). Once students' proposals are approved by their advisory committee, a separate QE examining committee is formed that evaluates whether the student has successfully completed the elements outlined in the proposal document.

When it came time for Amy to begin her QE, we worked together to create a proposal. With input from her advisory committee, Amy developed a material list with academic articles and book chapters, podcasts, community reports, and websites covering themes like geographies of care, care and justice in the city, and feminist academic praxis. The proposal outlined a series of practical components that Amy would implement as a part of the exam, involving creative endeavours (e.g. creating a zine) and relational ones (e.g. organizing a community panel discussion and research team workshop). Amy submitted five written critical reflections connecting these practical components to the literature she engaged with, which formed the basis of her assessment during the oral exam. The oral exam included a 30-minute presentation by Amy on her learning, followed by questions from the examining committee who each submitted one question to Amy ahead of the oral exam. We also asked examiners to come prepared to share what resonated with them from Amy's critical reflections.

### *Collaborative Autoethnography Process*

Following a long history of feminists using their own stories and experiences as the basis for their research (see Moss and Besio 2019; Hawkins et al. 2016), we conducted a collaborative autoethnography to make sense of, and theorize from, our experiences with Amy's QE process. Collaborative autoethnography is one way to collect and critically analyse personal stories of a shared experience (e.g., Adams-Hutcheson and Johnston 2019). Through ongoing dialogue, co-researchers reflect on and make connections across individual and shared social, emotional, and structural experiences. As feminist scholars Coia and Taylor (2013, 10) suggest, "it is in the telling and the retelling to each other that meaning is made and insight is gained." Collaborative autoethnography enabled us to explore our different, uniquely situated, and complex experiences of Amy's QE process, including investigating "our own roles in the creation of unequal caring or non-caring relations within the university [...] to foster more awareness of and attention to everyday practices of care" (Bartos 2021, 318).

To conduct this collaborative autoethnography, in the months following Amy's QE we debriefed over several informal conversations. We then spent time separately brainstorming and writing vignettes about key moments that occurred during the process. When we began, Amy had written eight vignettes and Roberta five. We used these autoethnographic vignettes to communicate our experiences to one another. We gave each other time to read and reflect on what we had written before we met again to discuss the differences and similarities between our experiences. Based on our literature review and our lived knowledge of QEs,

during this second meeting we also considered how the moments we shared related to more traditional QE formats. We identified and discussed emerging themes, considering our various subjectivities, relationship, stories, and the educational system we are a part of as well as what we were learning about doing an alternative QE. We then ordered the original vignettes we had written chronologically and edited our story for tone, length, and clarity, removing vignettes that were repetitive and adding in new ones where context was missing. This took several rounds of back-and-forth edits and discussion. Like others, we found that autoethnographic vignettes allowed us to “enhance the representational richness and reflexivity” of our experiences (Humphreys 2005, 840).

### Our Story of an Alternative QE

In what follows, we take a narrative approach to presenting the final version of our vignettes, which are woven together as a shared story. While engaging with the vignettes we invite readers to witness, and critically reflect on, our embodied and affective experiences with this alternative QE. After we share our story, we then discuss themes illustrated through it and make connections to the literature presented above.

#### *Designing the QE*

**Amy:** When it came time to prepare for my QE, I was excited and overwhelmed at the endless possibilities. My mind was racing. I knew deciding what to propose would be difficult. During this time Roberta invited me to her backyard to plan together. Sitting on her porch I shared my ideas, including what I was feeling anxious about. Through our brainstorming, we came up with a proposal based in feminist principles. Our plan was to include things I was already doing into my exam, while also building new skills and digging into theories and ideas. I felt calmer after meeting with Roberta; this wasn't just a test I needed to pass and it wasn't something that I had to do on my own. It was an opportunity to explore theory and practice, and to do so while supported by others.

**Roberta:** As usual Amy was filled with ideas. I was excited about them all but, as her supervisor, I still had so many questions that felt a bit overwhelming: How would I know if she was doing 'enough' to qualify with this open design structure? What if I advised her to do one thing but the rest of the examining committee didn't agree? Would she learn the 'right' kinds of texts and ideas this way? With her advisory committee's help, in the coming months we dialed back the proposal to be more 'doable.' Our plan was livelier than any geography QE I had seen before. It felt active and inviting. With only a slight sense of trepidation, I leaned into the plan we had created together, which centred relational and practice-based learning, and hoped for the best!

#### *Feminist praxis - A Workshop on Becoming a Feminist Research Team*

**Amy:** I was eager to explore what it means to be a feminist research team<sup>1</sup> through the creative workshop I designed as a practical component of my QE. I was ready to talk about what I was reading, to get out of my head, and hear my teammates' ideas. During the workshop, we

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<sup>1</sup> Similar to (but intentionally different from) a traditional research lab (see Caretta and Faria, 2021), our research team is a collection of students and postdoctoral feminist geographers advised by Roberta.



### *Theorizing with Community – A Community Conversation on Care*

**Amy:** Over 60 people had registered for the online panel I was hosting to explore community perspectives on care theory as part of my QE. I was anxious about wasting everyone's time, especially if the discussion fell flat. Heart racing, I opened the virtual waiting room. Suddenly, in the middle of a long QE period, I was surrounded by my community and my worries dissipated. In attendance were my friends and family, research collaborators, students in my cohort, and more. Theorists' words came alive during the panel discussion as well as afterwards when folks shared what they learned through the conversation. And I felt more alive, as the connections between my community practice and my QE became increasingly obvious through these conversations.

**Roberta:** The panel discussion was so refreshing! I was enthralled as community organizers and researchers talked through different concepts on care and described what these ideas meant to their work. Drawing on recent news and their own experiences they pushed many of the academic concepts that Amy was engaging with forward. People were clearly energized by participating, theorizing, and listening together. I left convinced that reaching outside academia as part of the QE was worthwhile and meaningful.

### *Needing More Time*

**Amy:** After a full two semesters preparing for my QE, I still had a lot left to do before my oral exam and only two months to do it. The repetition and creativity of making a zine – as well as many of the other practical components – had allowed me to think deeply about what I was learning, but it was more time consuming than I had imagined! There were many long days, and I was desperate for more time, but since I had created this process I felt like I needed to just put my head down and get it done. I was frustrated with myself for not practicing slow scholarship and at my inability to care for those in my life the way I wanted to as I hurried to meet the deadline. I was really struggling to implement the QE process we proposed.

**Roberta:** A little while before Amy was supposed to submit the written exam, she e-mailed me asking for an extension. I wrote back 'no,' but felt badly about it. I knew she had a lot to do and that I had approved all this work. But I also couldn't ignore all the logistics. It had taken writing so many e-mails, requesting, negotiating, and planning to get five faculty from different disciplines together to form this QE committee. Thinking about e-mailing them again to ask if they could evaluate the written work with less time was too much, so I didn't do it. After I said 'no' I sat with the guilt and anxiety that Amy would not get everything done on time. I was worried that my decision would affect her mental health and that it was antithetical to the balanced approach to work/lives I try to promote in our feminist research team.

### *The Written Submission*

**Amy:** I worked right until the deadline to submit the written exam. I felt sick to my stomach. I had spent the week furiously writing and reading. Had I missed citing a key concept or theorist? Would my writing expose me as an imposter? Would the committee appreciate what I was trying to do? Why had I made this so complicated?! On the Friday everything was due, I drafted my email to the committee early that morning – all I had to do was edit, upload my written work, and hit send. By the time I proofread and formatted everything, and made hundreds of tiny changes, it was late in the evening. I looked at the clock – 9:50pm – feeling flustered, uncertain, and alone, I sent the email.

**Roberta:** Looking at the self-portrait sketch in Amy's zine (Image 2) moved me from just reading the written component of her exam to feeling amazed by it. How did she learn all this? When, where, from who?! The document Amy submitted was filled with creativity and insight, woven together through reflections that connected readings and practice. I felt joy and pride while reading. I remember thinking 'this new QE process worked!' What she had learned through her community practice, relational approach, and creativity came through clearly. I felt relieved that Amy had been able to meet the deadline, and that she seemed to have learned so much through doing things differently.



**Image 2.** Amy's self-portrait sketch included as a part of her QE written component

### *The Oral Exam*

**Amy:** I didn't sleep the night before the oral exam, or well many nights before that. My chest was tight and my mind turning. I felt terrified by stories of examiners fixating on one sentence from a written exam, by the limited time I'd have to 'prove' myself, by the fear that my mind would go blank in front of 'experts.' Years existing in academia made me anticipate an adversarial encounter. I logged into the virtual meeting and started the oral QE with a story. Next, examiners discussed one thing they had connected with in my submission. Everyone was so generous in their sharing; however, after their attention turned back to me and I received a few unexpected questions during the question period, I began to panic. Why did I keep referencing the same few authors and repeating the same few words? I was convinced that everyone could see me spiralling. I somehow got through it and, when I came back after a short deliberation, I was told I passed. Had Roberta assured them I was ready to move on despite my poor performance? Dejected, I logged off, shut my computer, and wondered 'what now?'

**Roberta:** During the exam deliberation, the committee was feeling positive about the conversation we'd had and quickly agreed that Amy passed – there was no question! But I was frustrated with one examiner, who felt that Amy hadn't been practicing a feminist ethic of care in academia when she sent emails to the committee and submitted her written component outside of traditional office hours. I disagreed completely. Who were we to say what hours Amy should work? What about other responsibilities she might be balancing? Was the alternative approach we were trying to take partially at fault for the late-night emails and all the work Amy had to do? Instead of saying something, I just nodded, anxious to tell Amy she had passed. Afterward, I was upset with myself for not sticking up for Amy. In fact, I didn't tell Amy about that part of the discussion until we started writing this paper together.

### *After the Exam*

**Amy:** The day after my QE, I was devastated that I hadn't articulated myself in the confident, poised way I had imagined. I wouldn't speak about the exam with anyone. I laid on my couch watching TV, pausing only to read a message from my friend who asked how I was doing. She told me she 'sobbed for days' after her QE. I wondered if this feeling of hopelessness was common. Taking to Twitter, I found story upon story about students' anxiety leading up to, during, and after their QEs. So, it wasn't just me, others also felt this way – but wasn't I supposed to be doing things differently? Where did I go wrong? A few days later I met with Roberta. When she asked how I was feeling I started to cry. Roberta seemed shocked. She truly thought it had gone well! I explained that I was feeling let down after months of preparing. There was so much more I wanted to say, so much knowledge I hadn't displayed. Roberta assured me that I still had time to say the things I wanted to: in my dissertation and through other work. I liked that idea, and I left our conversation feeling a bit lighter and letting Roberta's interpretation of my QE begin to alter my own.

**Roberta:** Grabbing a coffee, Amy and I walked down the street together. The exam had been a few days ago but we hadn't debriefed right away since I thought it had gone so smoothly. A few minutes into our chat, as Amy cried and told me about her disappointment, I realized I was wrong. I felt terrible for not connecting with Amy right away. I reassured her that it went well and shared the positive committee feedback. I could see her doubt lifting as we spoke and left our conversation hoping she would feel better about it over time.

### *Looking Forward*

**Amy:** It's been five months since I finished my QE and I feel differently about it now. Some of the disappointment I felt after the oral exam is still there. I think about what made it so challenging: the context of the pandemic, my mental health struggles, and being one of the first students in my program – and the only feminist geographer I knew – engaging in an alternative QE. But I also think about the new relationships I made, the conversations that shifted my thinking, the ability to learn through art, and what made this possible: I had plenty of time and care, no children or relatives dependent on my care, a supportive partner, a quiet space to work, a scholarship covering my expenses, and a caring supervisor. All this gave me space to be creative and take risks. Since qualifying, I've had the chance to talk to other students in my program who haven't done their QEs yet. They're excited about the alternative formats they might take, but they're also anxious. They share many of the concerns I had. How do we choose what to engage with? How much is enough? What if others don't get what

we're trying to do? I've shared my experience too - the moments of care, joy, creativity, uncertainty, and fear. And I think we all feel a little better through this sharing. We want to do things differently, but differently - it seems - can be difficult.

**Roberta:** As the Director, I use the alternative QE structure to show the possibilities of our program to potential applicants. I call it 'flexible,' 'unique,' 'exciting.' This is true. But in practice it felt complicated. I have worried that students might fail only because the examiners don't consider their work robust or that students will do too much or too little. A few weeks after Amy's exam I called a meeting with all the supervisors in our program. Lots of questions emerged: What is the point of a QE in a PhD program? How will we know when a student has succeeded? How long should a student prepare? How much material should they engage with? The questions we asked were endless, some were basic and some existential. At times these questions have felt suffocating, but I have also come to understand them as a practice of care. We ask them because we want our students to flourish. We want QEs to be manageable and worthwhile. We want them to be meaningful - for students and for ourselves. It takes time and effort to make this so.

### The Educational Possibilities of Qualifying Differently

Our reflections emphasize the value of incorporating into the QE: (1) practical components, (2) moments for relational connection, and (3) multiple ways to gain and demonstrate knowledge. These aspects of our approach illustrate the educational possibilities of an alternative QE design, as well as the potential benefits to geography doctoral students.

The practical components Amy used to prepare for the exam allowed her to engage deeply with theory. It also helped to illustrate how ideas and theories come into being in and through practice. For example, the community panel, feminist research team workshop, and Amy's zine encouraged her to think critically about the theories she was reading and consider their application in different contexts, such as the university where we work, the city where we live, and her everyday life. This gave Amy practice extending and communicating scholars' ideas and bringing multiple theories into conversation with each other.

The relational dimension of the QE represents another educational possibility; specifically, it disrupted ideas around 'lone experts' and emphasized the relational production of knowledge (Capello 2023). For instance, reflecting on our research team in relation to feminist geography literature, helped us collectively connect our thinking and practice to the work of other feminist geographers. Additionally, co-creating an alternative QE enabled more moments for us to check-in with one another as we confirmed our plan with each other and Amy's committee. This helped Amy better understand the broader scholarly conversations related to her research as her advisory committee guided her proposal. It also challenged Amy, Roberta, and the advisory committee to consider what kind of knowledge we thought would be 'valued' by the QE committee and useful for Amy's dissertation work, allowing us to collectively and critically reflect on what and whose knowledge 'counts' in academia.

Through this process Amy also gained insights into her own approach to learning (see Fisher et al. 2020). She developed her knowledge through lively conversations with her research team and with others after hosting a community conversation, the repetition and creativity of making a zine, applying literature through critical reflections, and hearing stories

from the committee during the oral exam. This stands in contrast to traditional approaches to QEs that focus primarily on gaining and demonstrating knowledge through reading, writing, and an oral defense. The committee's positive feedback and Roberta's reflection on Amy's written submission highlights the pedagogical impact of this, where the depth of knowledge Amy gained through the process was clear.

The possibilities of prioritizing practice, relationships, and multiple ways of knowing through this QE process are relevant to geography in many ways. As geographers have argued for decades, geography will not break free from being a discipline dominated by white, male, cis-heteronormative, and ableist views and practices simply by adding a few 'diverse' readings to a course or QE reading list, or by admitting the occasional graduate student or faculty from historically-excluded groups (Gieseking 2023; Kinkaid and Fritzsche 2022; Oswin 2020; Hamilton et al. 2021). Embracing theoretical engagement through practice, encouraging relational knowledge production, and prioritizing reflexivity are key to the transformation needed in geography. Doing so in the QE process is an important step in practicing radical care in geography. It creates space for valuing and centring approaches, ideas, relationships, people, literature, epistemologies, and ontologies that have been systematically excluded and devalued in the discipline.

### Our Lived-experiences of an Alternative QE in the Uncaring University

Our story also provides insight on the lived experience of an alternative QE. It depicts many moments of joy and excitement, which were often connected to the educational possibilities outlined above. We both found it enlivening to engage with literature in new ways, whether through hosting/attending a public conversation, engaging in a lab discussion, or making/viewing Amy's zine. Most moments of joy were connected to being in relationship with others. Making room for ways of knowing and relating not privileged in the uncaring university elicited positive emotions for us - emotions that are in direct opposition to feelings of anxiety and despair students often experience in traditional QEs.

Considering our experiences also provides insights into the structures we came up against when trying take an alternative approach to QEs within the uncaring university. Our story highlights that we were *still* often anxious and overwhelmed during Amy's QE, despite the caring approach we centred. Throughout this process the neoliberal pressures and responsibilities of working within academia weighed (differently) on us. Our anxiety was frequently made worse by academia's isolating effects as well as our past (negative) experiences with QEs in geography and academic culture more broadly. Amy's most anxious moments were when she felt alone and uncertain. In some ways, Amy had internalized neoliberal and Western understandings about what it means to 'be an academic.' This made her feel like she needed to be stoic and certain in her communication, to know 'everything,' cite the 'right' authors, defend her arguments, and clearly verbalize her ideas.

Similarly, Roberta felt anxious and overwhelmed as Amy's supervisor and the Program Director solely tasked with organizing Amy's exam and guiding decisions about the process, as well as how it would impact subsequent students and be received by other faculty. At times, it was difficult for Roberta to trust this alternative exam process after her own experiences in graduate school with a rigidly defined QE that hinged on 'mastery,' as well as her years since of adjudicating clearly prescribed geography QEs. Additionally, we both felt intense pressure related to deadlines and scheduling, causing Amy to work long hours that impacted her

wellbeing and Roberta to feel stressed thinking about requesting an extension for Amy (and guilty when she chose not to).

Our anxiety and overwhelm was also often connected to our disappointment when we felt we had not enacted a caring academic praxis. As Amy focused single mindedly on preparing for the oral exam, she was upset she was not practicing slow scholarship or an ethic of care in the way she had imagined. She was also disappointed that she experienced stress and anxiety similar to doctoral candidates who went through more traditional QE processes. Additionally, Roberta was upset with herself for not 'sticking up' for Amy when the examiner questioned her feminist ethic of care during the deliberation. She also wished they had debriefed sooner after the oral exam to reassure Amy it went well.

After we reflected on our experiences together, there were other aspects of the process we found disappointing. We wished we would have been able to further challenge traditional hierarchies during Amy's exam. The question period ended up feeling like a traditional oral exam in geography and the evaluation involved Roberta and the committee meeting in a closed door setting to decide if Amy passed. These practices did not necessarily align with the caring approach we were trying to enact. Additionally, realizing the differences in our vignettes made us wish that we had been more transparent and intentional with one another about our challenges and emotions, as well as our goal to disrupt normative academic practices, throughout the process. Despite our strong and relatively non-hierarchical relationship, we were disappointed that we were not more "vulnerable and open to being changed" by one another, something key to a caring academic praxis (Bartos 2021, 318). Despite wanting to do things differently, existing academic structures and neoliberal realities often made this difficult in practice, with felt consequences for our individual and relational wellbeing.

### **A Conclusion on the Possibilities and Tensions of Alternative QE Formats**

Through this collaborative autoethnography, we found that an alternative, caring QE process can open new educational possibilities such as emphasizing the interdependence of theory and practice, highlighting knowledge as emerging through relationships, and valuing multiple ways of gaining and sharing knowledge. The possible contributions to student learning *and* to transforming ways of knowing and being in geography are immense. Like other geographers (e.g. Kinkaid and Fritzsche 2022; Mott and Cockayne 2017), we believe that the canon of geography must expand beyond those authors and articles most frequently cited and included on QE reading lists. As doctoral QEs have often served as a form of academic gatekeeping, they are therefore a pivotal point for cracking open the geography canon, as well as the discipline's entrenched epistemologies and practices. However, as evidenced by our experiences with an alternative approach to QEs, this can be challenging.

As seen throughout this paper, realizing the educational possibilities of taking an alternative, caring approach to QEs remains difficult in the uncaring university and requires a great deal of relational care work. As Bartos explains, "a relational approach to care in the university challenges the myth of the 'high-flier,' and acknowledges our fundamental interdependence" (2021, 315). It also involves critically reflecting on unequal power dynamics that exist within geography and academia more broadly, which make building relationships of care through the QE process difficult for many. Although the trust we had in each other and with Amy's advisory committee allowed us to be creative and open to a new approach,

many doctoral students (specifically those from historically-excluded groups) do not always have access to similar supportive relationships (see Dinsmore and Roksa 2023). When it comes to relational engagement in the QE process, we must think beyond just supervisor-supervisee and aim to build and foster good relationships with others including cohorts of doctoral students, program directors, faculty, librarians, academic support staff, etc. Expanding what relationships matter in the QE process can help illuminate inequitable practices as they arise and foster relational accountability within departments. Within the context of the uncaring university, doing this relational care work and negotiating power dynamics across different positions can be challenging.

Qualifying differently will require a transformational change in how academia operates and what it prioritizes. A lesson we took away from our experience is that QE requirements cannot just be changed from 'traditional' to 'alternative' without putting systems (e.g. training, community building, etc.) in place to support these changes. Taking an alternative approach to QEs, which centres critical care ethics, requires collaboratively considering what an alternative assessment should entail and building structures, relationships, and processes to ensure they do not replicate the challenges and negative consequences of traditional approaches. Ultimately, we argue that rather than being viewed as a rigorous and individualized test focused on creating 'expert geographers,' we all may be better served in thinking about QEs as a pedagogical process that is focused on practically and relationally engaging with diverse ways of knowing.

For us, the QE represents one of many forms of academic gatekeeping in geography where a more 'radical care' praxis is needed. We do not think that eliminating QEs altogether or simply shifting from traditional to alternative formats will automatically make geography a more caring discipline. However, we do think that practicing QEs in a more caring way can be an important place to start, and that critically reflecting on the QE process can illuminate the challenges and possibilities of enacting a radical care praxis in geography. Thus, we encourage those administering QEs to ask what purpose they serve - if any - and consider whether the resources are available to engage with them in a caring way.

Considering how geography might better enact a caring academic praxis, we join others in calling for additional research on QEs, exploring alternative, innovative, and feminist approaches, including the design and content of exams as well as the everyday experiences of doctoral students and their supervisors doing the relational care work required to qualify differently. We encourage geography scholars interested in disrupting traditional hierarchies, challenging what 'counts' as knowledge in the discipline, and supporting student wellbeing to pay attention to the QE process as a moment of intervention to practice academia otherwise.

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