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Slow Movement/Slow University: Critical Engagements. Introduction to the Thematic Section

Maggie O'Neill, Luke Martell, Heather Mendick & Ruth Müller

Key words: slow university; slow movement; critical engagement; fast academia

Abstract: This thematic section emerged from two seminars that took place at Durham University in England in November 2013 and March 2014 on the possibilities for thinking through what a change movement towards slow might mean for the University. *Slow movements* have emerged in relation to a number of topics: Slow food, *Citta* slow and more recently, [slow science](#). What motivated us in the seminars was to explore how far these movements could help us address the acceleration and intensification of work within our own and other universities, and indeed, what new learning, research, philosophies, practices, structures and governance might emerge. This editorial introduction presents the concept of the "slow university" and introduces our critical engagements with *slow*. The articles presented here interrogate the potentialities, challenges, problems and pitfalls of the slow university in an era of corporate culture and management rationality.

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1. Slow University?

Over the last two decades, a number of authors and activists have argued that our societies are in need of slowing down. Prominent examples include Carl HONORÉ's bestseller book "In Praise of Slowness" (2004)¹, Christopher RICHARD's fictional web-site [Slow Down Now](#) and Geir BERTHELSON's [World Institute of Slowness](#). Similarly, scholars in North America and Europe have been exploring possibilities of doing academia more slowly for some time. Brian TREANOR's "Slow University: A Manifesto" was written in the summer of 2007 and calls for others to join him in posting "slow hours" in his schedule where he does not write "with the intent of developing a publication or conference paper" (n.p.), answer the telephone, respond to e-mails or attend meetings. In "Against Speed Cosmopolitanism Towards the Slow University", Jeremy HUNSINGER (2013, n.p.) argues that "knowledge production should not be seen to be a race to be won or lost as it is in the speed cosmopolitanism of the hypercapitalist/hyperbureaucratized university". He points out that today both academic institutions and academics are active participants in what sociologist of time Barbara ADAM has called "speed fetishism" (2003, p.101). Rather, for

1 Discussed by MARTELL and MENDICK in their articles in this section.

HUNSINGER the main problem facing us is the way that the university as a system of knowledge production is complicit in the aforementioned ideologies, and academics are too; we are embroiled in the structures, practices, committees, growing managerialism, and accelerational goals. He calls on academics to resist individually and collectively and work to slow down the pace of academic life drawing on examples from Japan, the [Slow University of Warsaw](#), the [Slow Science Manifesto](#) and the pedagogical work of Ivan ILLICH (1971): "Education whether fast or slow is not a game of achievements or check-boxes; it is about life improvement and the opening of possible trajectories for that life" (HUNSINGER 2013, n.p). Yet, how we might slow down and create change is not made clear beyond a call for individual and collective actions. [1]

VOSTAL (2014, n.p) also critiques fast academia but at the same time, drawing upon analysis of in-depth interviews with senior British academics, tracks the positive attributes of variegated "acceleration as integral components of academic lifeworld" and recommends the use of "unhasty time" for academics. As MENDICK (in this section) argues in her article, speed, for example, in relation to blogging, should not always be restricted in the name of *slow*. VOSTAL (2014) promotes the notion of "scholarly time" that includes unhasty time, decelerative and accelerative moments conceived as a critical resource for academic work and as an "explicit political demand" and "an ethical principle" (n.p). Time and how time is managed and experienced in academic work is hence becoming an ever more prominent object of ethical, political, scholarly and personal deliberation. [2]

2. Critical Engagements With *Slow*: Why *Slow*?

This thematic section emerged from two seminars that took place at Durham University² 2013/2014. The seminars emerged from our parallel dialogues with academic and non-academic colleagues about the increasing pace of academic life, shared biographical experiences and resistances to the speeding up of higher education. A growing focus upon what universities are for is taking place in the context of the shifts in funding, increasing marketisation and audit as campaigns for the [Public University](#) and the [Council for the Defence of British Universities](#) make clear. As a leading academic and founding member of the Council for the Defence of British Universities states "our universities are lurching their own way into precariousness, and in many ways threaten to overtake the United States on the path toward corporate thinking and placing commercial values above academic ones" (DOCHERTY, 2012, n.p). [3]

Within this context, discussions took place at the seminars about: the impact of marketisation and neo-liberalism on higher education, and the experience of academics across the career spectrum especially early career and post-doctoral researchers, students and non-academics employed in the university sector. We also discussed the impossibility, for some, of developing a work/life balance in the face of punishing workloads and the impact of this on mental health; what indeed might constitute the *slow* university and what kind of future we might want to

2 Funded by the Institute for Advanced Studies, Ustinov College and the School for Applied Social Sciences Durham University.

imagine collectively, democratically; and finally, whether the Slow movement is a viable and desirable response to these circumstances and what alternatives there may be to Slow for disrupting our current working conditions? [4]

Presentations at seminar one, by MARTELL, MENDICK and MÜLLER, inspired reflections and questions from the experiences of the doctoral researchers, managers, administrators and academics participating, in relation to the inner pressures and affective/relational impacts of [fast academia](#); the hopes and fears; the resistance to gladiatorial, competitive cultures and the pressing need to look to the kind of futures we might want and the possible presents we can live and sustain. These issues were taken up in seminar two in dialogue groups³ to give space to the voices of the participants beyond the plenary discussions. [5]

We also invited some arts-based interventions in both seminars⁴. A poet, Matthew GRIFFITHS, contributed a poem on "How to be Late", presented here also in a podcast recording (see the [Appendix](#)); and sound artist [Chris WATSON](#) took us on a slow soundwalk after each seminar through Durham city, riverside and Botanic Gardens. Chris also contributed to seminar two with a presentation on the art of listening, to tuning in and tuning out. Bringing us in touch with our corporeality and senses, he shared his recordings of humpback whales singing in the [Silverbank](#)⁵ recorded over a three hour song cycle and slowed down the sound of bird song, too fast for us to take in ordinarily, to the exact individual notes. Writer Carl HONORÉ (2004, 2014) joined us as a participant in seminar one and contributed a presentation on the "Slow Revolution" in March 2014 in seminar two, where he gave us three tenets for the slow university: *measure less, think slowly and unplug*. A question remained as to how far *slow's* promotion of individual acts as a route to these ends can be successful and whether we need to look elsewhere to inspire collective approaches. [6]

It is clear that lines of critique, dialogue and creative application around the Slow movement are gathering momentum as the articles in this thematic section make clear. Moreover, understanding fast academia and the possibilities and potential for slow university requires qualitative research as the articles by MÜLLER and O'NEILL in this section make clear. Of course, qualitative research is impacted by the marketisation of higher education because learning how to do and carrying out qualitative research needs time⁶. We hope the articles stimulate readers to

3 Dialogue groups were chaired by MENDICK ("On Line All the Time: New Media Fast and Slow"), MÜLLER ("Racing for What? Careers in the Fast University") and John PRITCHARD ("Models of Change—How to Slow Down a University/Approaches to Organisational Change in a Slow University Context).

4 Art can makes visible experiences, hopes, ideas and can create a reflective space; it is also constitutive and can contribute to knowledge and understanding in sensory ways, that might not be possible to say in words alone (O'NEILL, 2008).

5 The Silverbank is situated approximately 70 miles (110km) north of the coast of the Dominican Republic. The Dominican Republic established the Silver Bank Sanctuary in 1986 and in 1996 it was enlarged and renamed the Sanctuary for the Marine Mammals of the Dominican Republic.

6 For example, in Germany, given the expansion in qualitative methods over the last twenty or more years, a [Memorandum für eine fundierte Methodenausbildung in den Human- und Sozialwissenschaften](#) [memorandum for a sound methodological training in the humanities and social sciences] has been developed that acknowledges the acquisition and the development of

undertake critical thinking *and* qualitative research on these important issues for the future of the university and higher education. [7]

Troubling the idea of Slow, what it means and how it is constituted and used, and what hope there might be for change in universities, is evident across all the articles outlined below, as is the need for sociological and inter-disciplinary research, dialogue and action. [8]

3. The Articles

In "The Slow University: Work, Time and Well-Being", Maggie O'NEILL⁷ argues that applying the metaphor of *slow* to the university enables us to focus upon our experiences of work, time and well-being in relation to the increasing pace and tempo of academic life. Possibilities for being slowly radical are examined through a psycho-social lens. She says that the success and indeed well-being of the modern university is intimately connected to the techniques used to contain anxiety. Confronting anxiety materially, discursively and symbolically involves addressing issues of governance and well-being through providing opportunities for more dialogue, spaciousness and slowing down. O'NEILL closes the article with a call for critical, biographical and participatory research to write our hidden histories, especially around work, time and well-being and that such research could develop praxis as purposeful knowledge to envision a radical democratic imaginary for the future of the University. [9]

Luke MARTELL argues in "The Slow University: Inequality, Power and Alternatives" that it is vital that we do not fetishise slow in relation to universities and instead calls on us to examine the social processes behind the increasing pace and speed and the moves towards slowness. Problematizing the very concept of slow affects what solutions we look for to the problems that slow identifies. For MARTELL *slow* is about structure and class rather than individual choice. [10]

Heather MENDICK interrogates "Social Class, Gender and the Pace of Academic Life" and asks what kind of solution slow offers to the crisis of speed within higher education in England. Drawing upon auto/biographical examples and popular culture she argues that the dominant Slow movement is classed and gendered and serves to reproduce wider patterns of inclusion and exclusion. Slow for MENDICK naturalises a particular relationship to self that requires both stability of employment and an individualist way of being to be able to calculate and invest in themselves for the future. She concludes, like MARTELL, that while Slow has offered many people a starting point for acting otherwise within higher education, we now need other approaches. [11]

In "Racing for What? Anticipation and Acceleration in the Work and Career Practices of Academic Life Science Postdocs", Ruth MÜLLER explores the

research skills needs *time* as well as the opportunity for experimentation and error.

7 See O'NEILL (2014a) for an introduction to the seminars and initial reflections on this theme, that provides the foundations for O'NEILL's (2014b) article in this section.

empirical details of the often acknowledged, but hardly studied acceleration of the pace of work and life in contemporary—new public management restructured—academia. Drawing on innovative qualitative research with 38 postdoctoral life scientists in Austria, she explores how this category of aspiring academics experience the temporalities of their work and career practices. She identifies "anticipatory acceleration" and "latent individualization" as key modes of temporally orienting the self. MÜLLER concludes by discussing the possible impacts of these particular temporal orientations for academic knowledge production more generally and investigates what role a movement towards *slow* could play in this context. She argues that slow can be a useful vector of intra- and inter-university mobilization. [12]

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Appendix: "How to be Late": Poem and Podcast by Matthew GRIFFITHS

Matthew GRIFFITHS has recently completed a PhD on modernist poetics and climate change at Durham University. His debut poetry pamphlet, "How to be Late", was published in 2013 (pp.25-27), and a novel, "The Weather on Versimmon", was published in 2012.

Below Matthew GRIFFITHS reads his poem, as he did at the Slow University seminar at Durham University. The text of GRIFFITHS poem is also reproduced below.

The Podcast

[How to be Late](#), audio file

The Poem

Think in the minute.

Offset your steps

Against Earth beat.

Sleep in unconscionable

Metre.

Sling your hammock
From a calendar grid
Blank with days
That do not hold.
You bang
Your waking
Head on sun
As if you forget
It's there. Go
Nowhere
Until wrung dry
Of sleep. Don't
Move in the moment
But in a route
Described
By tarmac—our camera
Will say when. The last
Bar must fill
With notes, you must watch
The drop
Vanish into air
Entirely. Push forehead
Down, the heart out
Against ribs reined tight,
Tethered
To home by memory.
If you drive, drive
Into every trap
Of space. Throw pebbles
Across
Your path, over riverbed, seabed,
Flowers. Grease your
Shoulders, bulk your bladder
Back. Push sky away with

Each breath.
Clouds footprint your face.
Time is too minute
Not to pad each tick
With polystyrene tocks. Stretched
Seconds
Snap in your flinching
Face. Bolt the gate now
The groom has jilted.
The door swings, the lights
Switch on
Your tugged-down
Progress. Overstep your
Mark, halt like a mirror,
Ready for the punctual
Gazes
Of faces that turn on you.
Arrange, defer, anticipate.
Hold a stopwatch to each
Thought. Pretend you
Still have time.

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