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Alternatives in the academe: swimming with absurd flippers

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ABSTRACT

This viewpoint reflects on challenges that emerge when we who did not construct academic practices—and whom academic practices were not constructed for—strap on the absurd flippers and prepare to dive into the deep of the academe. Challenging the preferring of emotion-drained forms of expression within the academe, this text attempts to employ alternative writing methodologies while asking: What can academia encapsulate today? Do spaces for ‘Otherness’ exist, and are we employing our Otherness to bring forth changes? These questions are held up against the neoliberalization of universities and the feminist response emerging through ‘slow scholarship’. The text proposes that current neoliberalization of universities intensify masculinist practices and needs challenging. However, slow scholarship efforts are flawed for attempting to dismantle neoliberalizing processes with the tools of neoliberalism itself.

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Academic life; feminist geographies; neoliberalism; slow scholarship; writing methodologies

The female geographer

First having read the book of myths,
and loaded the camera,
and checked the edge of the knife-blade,
I put on the body-armor of black rubber
the absurd flippers
the grave and awkward mask.
I am having to do this
not like Cousteau with his assiduous team
aboard the sun-flooded schooner
but here alone.

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There is a ladder
the ladder is always there
hanging innocently close to the side of the schooner.
We know what it is for,
we who have used it.
Otherwise it is a piece of maritime floss
some sundry equipment.

I go down.
Rung after rung and still
the oxygen immerses me
the blue light
the clear atoms of our human air.
I go down
my flippers cripple me,
I crawl like an insect down the ladder
and there is no one to tell me when the ocean will begin.

From *Diving into the Wreck: Poems 1971–1972* by Adrienne Rich (1994)

Entering academia can much be seen as what Adrienne Rich describes as *diving into the wreck*. Rich describes the entering of unknown territory, not having been developed for you or by people like you, whilst wearing equipment not fitting you, not having been constructed with you in mind. A foreign landscape within which one has to familiarize oneself in order to explore ‘the wreck and not the story of the wreck’ (Rich 1994).

The poem brings to mind Caroline Criado-Perez’ overview of a range of annoyances and dangers faced by women for merely existing in a world designed for men; Not being recognized by voice-recognition technologies due to higher-pitched voices than what the technology is designed to recognize; Police officers losing their lives after removing stab vests that—due to these being designed for a male standard—were hindering them from properly performing their job; Women having a 17% higher risk of being killed when in a car accident due to car security being built around the ‘standard’ (male) body (Criado-Perez 2019).

Academia, and the geography discipline, has also been constructed around a male default, with virtues and traits associated with the socially constructed male being emphasized and guiding praxis. The history of the discipline is largely understood as developed and applied with militant and imperialist purposes (Harvey 1984), without recognizing women such as Zonia Baber working to construct a geography which was not colonialist, but collaborative and uniting (McNeill 2018, Baber 1904). Whereas men who travelled the world and wrote about their voyages were considered early geographers, women conducting such practices were dismissed as mere travelers and refused the label of ‘geographer’ (Rose 1993). Similarly, Valestrand (1982, my translation) points out that in geographic textbooks

women have largely been found 'at the end of the preface, where they are thanked for typing.' In general, we see an erasure of women's work from the history of the geography discipline (McNeill 2018).

Writing practices within academia have also been constructed around perceived 'male' values (Gannett 1992), attempting to create general truths from non-general positions (Minh-Ha 1989). As Trinh T. Minh-Ha (1989, 121) claims, 'the world's earliest archives or libraries were the memories of women.' Still, when construing libraries and archives in our spaces of modern knowledge, there are no shelves for these knowledges. In the spaces of 'objective' knowledge, 'creative, reflexive, and experimental writing methodologies have tended to be ... excluded' (Livholts 2012, 3), and lived experience has quickly been 'dismissed as "stories"' (Linda Brodkey, in Gannett 1992, 12). This seems to be well-known, but still I can't help to question whether we are sufficiently engaging with the processes that encourage us to work and write bigly, and the alternatives we are actively opting out of every day.

Audre Lorde (2018, 1) once described poetry as 'distillation of experience.' If poetry can comprise life in its distilled form, why can theoretical work not be presented in distilled forms? When knowledge-as-objectivity has lost its battle to knowledge-as-situated (Harding 2004), why can the expression of knowledge not fully embrace its situatedness? Lorde has called out the potential of *anger* in challenging the oppressions 'which brought that anger into being' (Lorde 2018, 26). Welcoming emotions as strategic tools in our academic world, can we not more effectively challenge those structures under which we have suffered and increase the chances of a new dawn emerging from our Otherness? How can we *not*? Asking whether women can 'adapt traditionally male dominated modes of writing and analysis to the articulation of female oppression and desire' or if we should rather 'reject tools that may simply re-inscribe our marginality,' Mary Jacobus (2012, 14) seem to give us an answer more than a question.

Employing otherness/leaking like a man

As a young female academic, I frequently emerge as the 'Other'. At a smart city conference, I was seen as a potential contributor to 'the heart' of the smart city, due to my gender. I have been failed to be taken seriously when showing 'too much emotion' in the workplace. I have been believed to be infatuated by male colleagues due to shared disciplinal eagerness. My gender, intersecting with e.g. my age (Valentine 2007) clearly influences my emerging identities, within and outside academia, with and without my awareness. So how do I employ this Otherness, making it my ladder and not my casket?

'I remain both subject and object of my own research. I am always leaking: mascara blood tears and ink in my labor,' Ulrika Dahl writes in her shared work with Dahl and Hallgren (2012, 180). Arguably, we are all leaking into our research. Male, female, non-binary, we leak. Parts of us will be fixed to our texts like old coffee

stains when we hand them in for review. But how do we remain aware and in control of this leaking? How do we ensure our leaking is not seen as a weakness?

In my academic work, I suspect myself of attempting to leak manly; I strip myself of mascara and leak like a man. 'Taught in a culture of domination by those who dominate' (Hooks 2004, 21), I frequently find myself inspired by men and women who work like men. I am inspired by David Harvey, Neil Smith and Erik Swyngedouw. I admire the way they master geography. I aim in their direction. I want to dive like they dive and be recognized for challenging the field with something Other than my Otherness. But if these are my benchmarks, what am I aiming for? If, in fact, 'THE NEW THINGS WE PRODUCE WE PRODUCE ON CONDITION OF REPETITION ONLY' (Dahl and Hallgren 2012, 180), am I partaking in the reproduction of a white, heteronormative discipline by mirroring these theorists? (Hopkins 2017). Merely by joining the academy, I am contributing to an increase of women in my field. But does the quest not transcend a mere numbers game? (Weiner 1986). As women 'take over the universities', we are assumed to be equals, but can I willingly accept this without joining theorists such as David (2016) and Morley (2011) in their claims that this quantitative increase of women has not led to a qualitative change—but rather the opposite. I contribute with a +1 to the balancing scheme, but if I perform male research through *pant-suit feminism* (Gökarksel and Smith 2017), is that really contributing at all?

Cindi Katz once shared the painful experience of having written a text she perceived as having great importance to her field—only to have her perspectives ignored by the 'big guys' (Kjaerås and Wathne In Press). Am I drawn to major theories and dominant writing styles to avoid the pains of being marginalized? 'Women's access to discourse involves submission to phallogocentricity,' Jacobus (2012, 12) argues. Like Adrienne Rich (in Hooks 2004, 16), I feel like 'this is the oppressor's language, yet I need it to talk to you.' Am I sacrificing my Otherness on the altar of phallogocentricity for a shot at success? And am I limiting my potential by merely imitating the ways of working and writing that have become familiar to me through the works of men? I put on my 'absurd flippers' and refuse to let them cripple me—but do they still?

These are uneasy questions. Largely because I hear the voices of feminists of the past insisting that rather than succeeding within old structures, the aim should be to construct new ones. Still, one cannot easily dismiss the sentiment of wanting to conquer the existing system and agreeing to play by its rules in attempting to do so.

Intensifying the streams

Neoliberalism has taken its toll on the industry of knowledge. One of the most defining traits of neoliberalism is the urge to define everything in terms

of a constructed monetary value (Fisher 2009), which in the university sector has translated into an ethos of competitiveness and economic efficiency wherein doing 'good work' has become less important than generating income (Acker 2017, Kenway 2000). From being a value in itself, knowledge becomes valuable due to its exchangeability for status, economic growth and ranking (Berg, Huijbens, and Larsen 2016). This has severe consequences for the mental health and well-being of staff and students (Fisher 2009, Berg, Huijbens, and Larsen 2016, Mahony and Weiner 2019), as well as the research agendas that are prioritized and funded (Acker and Wagner 2019). As Jane Kenway (2000, 169) points out, 'feminism has best flourished in those faculties not easily tied to economic utility.' Those are now the spaces most likely to be residualized by the neoliberalizing university.

The shifts having occurred in the academe under processes of neoliberalization are arguably intensifying masculinist university practices. Traits considered typical of men, such as efficiency and competitiveness, are prioritized over traits considered to be more feminine, such as regenerative and collaborative practices (David 2016, Acker and Wagner 2019, Morley 2003). Likely to be a result of this, productiveness in academia remain highly unequal despite a more even gender balance. Some suggest that male scholars prioritize high-yielding tasks within the 'neoliberal rationality', while female scholars are more likely to engage in regenerative and collaborative tasks such as 'academic housekeeping': mental support of concerned students, tidying faculty kitchens, organizing extracurricular seminars, etc. Even if important, such work is generally lower-yielding in terms of career building (Mountz et al. 2015).

The pressures of the neoliberalizing university are likely to be felt by all. But, being more prone to prioritize lower-yielding tasks—and perhaps initially less comfortable within the masculinist forms of knowledge production that have become regarded as par excellence within the academe, women are likely to find such pressures particularly straining (Kenway 2000). For those already uncomfortable maneuvering the absurd flippers, the intensification of the streams might be felt harder than for those who were already mastering the currents.

The tortoise and the hare

The fast-paced and output-oriented university has been challenged by a 'feminist and collective model of slow scholarship' (Mountz et al. 2015, 1238). Collectively articulated in the paper *For Slow Scholarship*, Mountz et al. (2015, 1237) present the slowing down of university practices as challenging 'the accelerated time and elitism of the neoliberal university.' They argue that the neoliberalizing university has failed to value academic tasks not easily measured in economic terms and argue for an academe with a stronger

emphasis on female traits. The goal of the slow academe is to secure the comfort of individual researchers and the academe at large through developing 'a feminist care ethics ... that views: 'self-care as warfare'. Cultivating space to care for ourselves, our colleagues, and our students is, in fact, a political activity when we are situated in institutions that devalue and militate against such relations and practices' Mountz et al. (2015, 1239) argue. 'Slowing down' the academe is thence a collective effort to restructure time and reduce the intensified pressures for academic practitioners, freeing time to 'slowly and deliberately engaging with an object, text, or field' (Mountz et al. 2015, 1238). This includes counting what others don't (such as academic housekeeping), taking care of others, writing fewer emails, making time to think and write, and reaching for the minimum (aiming at 'good enough').

This critique rightfully addresses the harmful emphasis on speed and utility within the neoliberal university (Kenway 2000) and is worth taking seriously. However, the slow scholarship poses some dangers. I was introduced to the concept through an article listed on a PhD course syllabus where, for a two-day module, I was to read an additional 18 papers, 5 books, and prepare a 10-minute presentation (not an uncommon workload for such courses). The text had little relevance besides offering an excuse to avoid my readings. Instead of sparking motivation, the call for a slow scholarship felt like a punch to the stomach. Putting on my absurd flippers and getting ready to explore the wreck, I was suddenly told that diving all the way down would actually be non-solidary. That I should reject the practice of diving and encourage others to do the same. For someone wanting to master the absurd flippers, this felt like a push to resign.

I truly believe slowing down my practice would not dismantle anything but my academic career. As Katz argue, 'if you right now as a new assistant professor here would say ... "I am going to write one article, which is really going to be great, but it is going to take two years," you are not going to get tenure' (Kjaerås and Wathne In Press, 22). By asking researchers to slow down their practices, however collectively, the slow scholarship movement ends up individualizing the structural problem that masculinist and neoliberalizing university practices are posing. It tells individual academics that they will ultimately benefit from working slow. It's a race between the tortoise and the hare where we are told to be the tortoise, knowing that we are surrounded by hares that would thrive in a world where their 'competitors' self-impose a slow work-tactic.

Of course, there is a wide potential in coming together to form collective spaces of resistance, as for example labor movements have demonstrated. However, the purpose of such collective spaces of resistance must be the struggle for structural changes—not collectives organized around the self-

imposition of restrictions. More fundamentally, any meaningful confrontation with the neoliberal academe must resist the temptation of employing the devices of neoliberalism itself. Whereas neoliberalism insists on individualization, we must not form collectives that take part in such individualism. Instead, our collective spaces of resistance must direct their efforts outwards. For, as Audre Lorde (2018, 19) uphold, ‘the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.’

A change of water

Geography still suffers from its heritage as a masculinist discipline within a masculinist university. Emerging as a woman within the academe is challenging, and often feels like a choice between employing my Otherness to promote change—risking being dismissed as marginal in the process—or succumbing to phallogocentricity to have a shot at success. The neoliberalizing of the university can be seen as intensifying masculinist traits and should be challenged. However, responses such as the slow scholarship movement risks doing more harm than good by focusing its attention inwards instead of outwards.

I would love to see more acceptance for diversity within the discipline. I would love to see an academe that embraces slow work, alternative writing and untraditional research agendas. However, I do not see this battle being won by enclaves of academics coming together to set fire to their absurd flippers. It requires a change of water.

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