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Energizing Slow Scholarship A Political Ecology Approach to a More Just Academy and Beyond

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[See table of contents](#)

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Article abstract

The term “slow scholarship” has become increasingly prominent in academia in recent years. It is an analytical framework for critiquing the neoliberalization and corporatization of the academy, and the associated “speeding up” of academic labor. The phrase also serves as a call to transform institutions of higher education so that they are more responsive to the needs of academic workers and the students whom they serve. For proponents of slow scholarship, such a transformation necessitates a stretching out of time, a slowing down, to allow for enhanced reflection and inquiry. Missing thus far from the discussion of slow scholarship is how energy, particularly of a fossil-fueled variety, facilitates the speed-up of the academy. Indeed, the “fast” academy requires high levels of energy consumption. Employing a political ecology lens, we thus seek to enlarge the scope of slow scholarship, while pushing for a broader and deeper political project. We contend that a more expansive slow scholarship requires grappling with energy consumption and mobility as well as their associated inequities. This entails, as we explore in the conclusion, a project of justice that transcends the boundaries of the academy. Such a project involves “stretching the boundaries of care” to recognize, include and transform the human and non-human assemblages that help make contemporary academia possible.

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Energizing Slow Scholarship: A Political Ecology Approach to a More Just Academy and Beyond

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Abstract

The term “slow scholarship” has become increasingly prominent in academia in recent years. It is an analytical framework for critiquing the neoliberalization and corporatization of the academy, and the associated “speeding up” of academic labor. The phrase also serves as a call to transform institutions of higher education so that they are more responsive to the needs of academic workers and the students whom they serve. For proponents of slow scholarship, such a transformation necessitates a stretching out of time, a slowing down, to allow for enhanced reflection and inquiry. Missing thus far from the discussion of slow scholarship is how energy, particularly of a fossil-fueled variety, facilitates the speed-up of the academy. Indeed, the “fast” academy requires high levels of energy consumption. Employing a political ecology lens, we thus seek to enlarge the scope of slow scholarship, while pushing for a broader and deeper political project. We contend that a more expansive slow scholarship requires grappling with energy consumption and mobility as well as their associated inequities. This entails, as we explore in the conclusion, a project of justice that transcends the boundaries of the academy. Such a project involves “stretching the boundaries of care” to recognize, include and transform the human *and* non-human assemblages that help make contemporary academia possible.

Keywords

energy, geographies of care, mobility, political ecology, slow scholarship, speed

Introduction

In a ground-breaking article published in 2015, the Great Lakes Feminist Collective (GLFC) introduced “slow scholarship” into the discipline of geography. Through a critique of the neoliberalization of higher education and an associated “speed-up” of academic labor, the article challenges “the ever-increasing demands of academic life: the acceleration of time in which we are expected to do more and more” (Mountz et al. 2015, 1237). The acceleration and multiplication of work tasks, the Collective suggests, limit academics’ ability to accomplish meaningful research and scholarship, while similarly undermining the quality of teaching and service. As a form of feminist politics, slowing down, the GLFC contends, is a way to resist neoliberalism. The Collective argues that, when predicated on a feminist ethics of care (see Lawson 2009), deceleration can also contribute to the “decolonization of knowledge” (p. 1254) that challenges hierarchies, exclusions, and violence both within and beyond academia.

Other scholars have also championed slow scholarship. Hartman and Darab (2010, 59), for instance, insist that slowing down is necessary for allowing “the kinds of deep cognitive processes that are involved in innovative and creative thinking.” Suggesting a broader approach that goes beyond a critique of neoliberalism, Berg and Seeber (2016, x) assert that, “Corporatization has compromised academic life and sped up the clock.” Their concern extends beyond the impact on research and writing, to include teaching and the social relationships embodied in collegiality. They thus call upon scholars to challenge acceleration within the academy. Slowing down, they say, facilitates the ability to ponder and evaluate at a level needed to produce knowledge; it also allows one to cultivate “emotional and intellectual resilience to the effects of the corporatization of higher education” (Berg and Seeber 2016, 90).

The idea of slow scholarship has also been engaged with in a more critical manner. Meyerhoff and Noterman (2019: 217), for example, address the GLFC’s article directly; the two authors argue that the “over-politicizing of temporality” runs the risk of obscuring and marginalizing other important struggles within academia. The issue is not whether the academy is “fast” or “slow,” but rather *who* does and does not have control over matters of time and space. While endorsing the GLFC’s position that slow scholarship is an inherently collective endeavor that addresses power and inequality within the university through a feminist ethics of care, they call for a broader and deeper political project that challenges the academic project in and of itself. This requires “a more thoroughly decolonial, anti-racist historicizing of the university’s space-times” (Meyerhoff and Noterman 2019, 220; see also Hunt 2021).

We also consider the idea of slow scholarship as valuable for imagining and enacting more just academic futures. Moreover, we similarly push for a broader and deeper political project. We do so by working to enlarge the scope of slow scholarship in terms of how matters of speed are analyzed and addressed. We contend that a more expansive slow scholarship requires grappling with energy consumption and mobility as well as their associated

inequities. At the same time, we concur with Debbie Hopkins' suggestion (Hopkins, this issue) about the need for being cognizant of how the exercise of mobility, and one's level of control over it, is tied to inequities within the academy of multiple sorts such as the security or precarity of one's employment (see also Başak and Van Mol 2017).

In what follows, we center the ties between social power and "difference," resource consumption, and "nature." We thus mobilize a political ecology lens to build our argument. In the first section, we consider existing inequalities between academic institutions and across global space in terms of mobility and resource consumption. The second section addresses energy, particularly in the form of fossil fuel upon which "fast scholarship" depends. Building on the implications of the first and second topics, the conclusion argues in favor of "stretching the boundaries of care" (see Bartos, 2019) to recognize, include and transform the human *and* non-human assemblages that help make contemporary academia possible.

"Mobilism" and Academia

Slow scholarship advocates highlight a desire to "claim time" from the increasing bureaucratic and professional demands of contemporary universities. Resisting these demands, they suggest, would slow down the experience of time while re-signifying its meaning. Ironically, those who promote slow scholarship, however, are largely silent about corporeal mobility or the speed of travel. This silence matters because academic institutions, especially well-resourced ones, embody high levels of "fast," long-distance mobility—particularly through resource-intensive, high-CO₂-emitting air travel (see O'Neill 2023). Key manifestations include the recruitment of geographically diverse and internationalized faculty and student bodies and the push towards ever increasing travel by students and faculty in the pursuit of knowledge production and consumption. This fossil-fueled movement across space, typically celebrated by universities and scholarly professional associations, is part of a broader pattern in which the hypermobility of some is related to the constrained mobility of others (see Cresswell 2006, Illich 1974, Massey 1993, Nevins 2018). As Shamir (2005, 199) points out, "enclosure, entrapment and containment" are just as much a part of globalization as "the death of distance" (quoting Cairncross, 1997) reflected by the hypermobility enjoyed by a small slice of the world's population. Indeed, as Shamir suggests, they are co-productive. In this regard, not only is (im)mobility socially produced (Cresswell 2006), it is also world-making. Given the marked degree to which differences in mobility are associated with the production of unequal life and death circumstances, we might characterize this as "mobilism" (Nevins 2023)—a systemic "ism" (like racism and sexism, for instance) that is both product and producer of unjust privilege and disadvantage (see Nevins, Allen, and Watson 2022). This helps explain the pronounced disparities in terms of who flies and who does not (see, for instance, Büchs and Mattioli 2021), a characteristic also manifest within academic institutions, among both faculty (e.g., Pargman 2022) and students (e.g., Sippell, Meyer, and Scholliers 2018).

Mobility involves different levels of speed, the capacity for which is tied to one's power and position on the socioeconomic food chain (Illich 1974). This fact is recognized by analysts who both celebrate the world of speed and those who decry it. World Economic Forum founder, Klaus Schwab (a celebrant), for instance, asserts, "it is not the big fish which eats the small fish, it's the fast fish which eats the *slow* fish" (Botros 2015). Meanwhile, decrier Mark

Taylor (2014, 2) contends that “speed has become a, if not the, primary, socioeconomic differentiator.” It is also a differentiator among academic institutions.

There is, moreover, a geography of speed. Only a small portion of the world’s population, who are generally concentrated in cities and countries of affluence, can travel at great speed. Meanwhile, the global majority, relegated to “slowness,” typically reside in places along the globe’s socioeconomic margins, an outcome that reflects in no small part a history of colonialism (see García 2021). This geographical unevenness overlaps heavily with the geography of fossil fuel consumption, a matter of growing importance in an era of intensifying climate breakdown.

The Political Ecology of Scholarship, Fast and Slow

There is a strong correlation between speed and energy usage (Illich 1974; Nevins 2018). Fast scholarship, and its relationship to fast forms of mobility, embody specific socioecological assemblages, highlighting the fact that universities are carbon-intensive institutions. It is thus striking that, like fast forms of mobility, matters of energy—which are central to the capacity to be “fast”—remain largely unaddressed in the slow scholarship literature. Environmental concerns do make occasional spectral appearances. For example, in their book’s introduction, Berg and Seeber (2016) cite Taylor (2014, 342), who writes, “As acceleration accelerates, individuals, societies, economies, and even the environment approach meltdown” (Berg and Seeber 2016, 8). Yet their brief volume says almost nothing about the environment or resource consumption beyond this mention. In a somewhat similar fashion, Meyerhoff and Noterman (2019, 238) conclude by calling for a decolonization of the academy that draws on and engages “Indigenous interpretations of ‘land’ as inter-relationships between the soil, humans, non-human animals, plants, water” etc. Despite this, the article’s analysis of the socio-ecological relationships embodied in contemporary academia remains vague.

Timothy Mitchell’s *Carbon Democracy* helps to articulate the ways in which energy consumption is central to academia’s political economy. As Mitchell (2011, 6) asserts, the world’s “leading industrialized countries are also oil states.” One could make a similar observation about higher education, and elite, research-intensive institutions in particular: they are fossil-fuel entities or *carbon universities*. In other words, the very nature of the institutions—in terms of their infrastructure, activities, and mobilities—depend on and necessitate high levels of energy consumption.¹ As Mitchell (2011, 6) states in relation to the world’s wealthy countries, “Without the energy they derive from oil their current forms of political and economic life would not exist. Their citizens have developed ways of eating, traveling, housing themselves and consuming other goods and services that require very large amounts of energy from oil and other fossil fuels.”

Regarding the neoliberal university, the target of criticism of many slow scholarship advocates, the emphasis on productivity, out-competing rival institutions, the quest for an increase in research grants and related forms of output, and growing internationalization (see

¹ The recent development of international academic ‘hubs’ based on satellite campuses in places such as Abu Dhabi and Qatar demonstrate the relationship between oil, academia and ‘fastness’ in a particularly startling manner.

Martin 2021) all have implications for growth in energy consumption (see, e.g., Gormally et al. 2019). Thus, challenging the corporatization or neoliberalization of academia entails not only slowing down but also consuming less—and, by extension, embracing a broad notion of sustainability sensitive to power and associated inequities (see Hopkins, this issue). It also necessitates transforming the relationship between academia and energy consumption in a way that goes beyond a “greening” of the energy supply.

A key reason is the ongoing, broad destruction of the environment wrought by dense, high-yielding energy sources such as fossil fuels. Indeed, the exploitation of mineral energy has been central to global ecological despoliation, manifestations of which range from dramatic decreases in biodiversity and increasing (and unhealthy) concentrations of nitrogen and phosphorous in drinking water supplies to rapid degradation of soils (see Rockström et al. 2023). Despite promises that it would lead to the liberation of humanity from work, dense energy, “has helped intensify the exploitation of labor and accelerate the disruption of human relationships” (Cox 2020, 70; see also Cox 2021). The marked socio-economic inequality that characterizes the contemporary world is one obvious manifestation.

Such disparity helps explain why matters of equity are rightly central to international debates surrounding mitigation scenarios in relation to climate change. Consistency with the principle of fairness demands that those who have benefited most from fossil fuel consumption lead the way in “slowing down” (see Anderson et al. 2022). To be clear, we are speaking of claiming time *and* refusing speed, particularly in terms of actual mobility and the broader background of energy consumption that underpins fast scholarship. This de-growth-like approach is *not*, as some suggest (e.g., Huber 2023), effectively a recipe for generalized austerity. Instead, it aims to facilitate an overall decrease in fossil fuel consumption inherent in “slowing down” that is linked to a politics of redistribution (see, for example, Roelofs 2019). Reining in the mobility of “speed capitalists” (Illich 1974) may increase the possibility of “abundance” for those relegated to the edges of the fast world, including the non-human (Collard, et al., 2015). As Schmelzer et al. (2022, 22) explain, “While austerity increases inequality by thrashing public services and benefiting the rich, degrowth policies focus on democratizing production, curbing the wealth and overconsumption of the rich, expanding public services, and increasing equality within and between societies” (see also Saitō 2024).

Conclusion: The Ethics of Care Unbounded

In recent feminist scholarship, care has emerged as a key political and ethical concept. By highlighting “concepts of relationality and interdependence as fundamental to our shared experiences of being human” (Bartos 2019, 768), it directly challenges the individualism of neoliberalism. This helps explain why, in championing slow scholarship, the Great Lakes Feminist Collective calls for the creation of caring communities. Such communities, GLFC explains by quoting Ahmed (2014), are a means of “finding ways to exist in a world that is diminishing” (Mountz et al. 2015, 1239). Because communities have boundaries, nonetheless, a question arises as to who is to be included in the realm of care. This is a question that the GLFC also poses in advocating for an expansion of “our community of care beyond those in the academy” (Mountz et al. 2015, 1251).

Who is within this community needs to be more explicit. If ethics is concerned with our obligations to those to whom we are tied, the academic community of care must go beyond those with whom we work in a direct sense; it must also be based on relations that are not

exploitative and that grapple with difference of an unjust, hierarchical sort (see Neely and Lopez 2022). The very ability of practitioners and beneficiaries of “fast scholarship” to live our lives as we do relies on the labor and dispossession—social and ecological—of countless unseen individuals. What relations of care should look like within this broader ethical community is beyond the scope of this paper. However, one element that undoubtedly must be present is a sharing of environmental resources, one that allows, at a minimum, for all to realize livelihoods of “decent material conditions and basic services” (Millwood-Hopkins et al. 2020: 2). As Neely and Lopez (2022) argue, redistribution should be central to a politics of care.

At the same time, these relations of care must extend, as Audra Mitchell (2015) suggests, beyond the “circle” of humanity. In an increasingly socio-natural world, one in which the colonial illusion that that humans are separate from the other-than-human (see Hunt 2021; Nevins et al. 2022) is becoming increasingly visible, the entanglements between humans and other life forms open up new possibilities in terms of global solidarity and, by extension, expansive communities of care.

Slow scholarship, in other words, requires not only a fundamental reworking of social relations within and beyond the academy, but also with “nature.” This has profound implications for our inextricably tied practices on both the individual and collective fronts (see Jepson et al. 2022), in relationship to both energy consumption and speed, among other matters.

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