

2 Response Paper

An Embodied Reflection of/to/ about Slow Scholarship (Or How to Practise Care and Resistance in Neoliberal Academia)

Response to Emelie Larsson,
Karin Larsson Hult, Lisa Ridzén,
and Ida Sjöberg

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Intentions, Resonances, and Frictions

Finding resonance across spaces, experiences, and ideas is exciting, sometimes challenging, often simultaneously precious and confrontational. This is how I think groups of affinity and intellectual and political communities come into being, in academia as well as in activism. This is the case, however, only if these resonances are not appropriated by one person who claims ownership and makes certain ideas, born from collectivities, one's "original" property; a tendency I have sadly noticed among scholars.

When I speak about resonances as being both precious and confrontational, I point to a tension which I believe often to be a product of neoliberal academia. Finding someone who seems to have arrived at the same concepts, the same conclusions, the same body of scholarship as you have, can make you think: has this been done before? Are my ideas, which I've cultivated with passion and accurate research, something that's already been done before? Am I even able to produce original scholarship? Am I even good enough to be a scholar in this field? I remember having these kinds of thoughts when I began as a PhD student, but they still occur now that I have a stable contract as assistant professor in a well-known European university.

Luckily, these kinds of thoughts emerge at the same time as one starts feeling all the emotions of excitement and recognition: that tingling sense of being "on to something", the sense of having found confirmation that what I am thinking must be just a little bit more valid if other people have also thought about it. The sense that if there are other scholars who are working on the same topics as you, in a similar manner, it makes you feel less alone. It

makes you think that there is a community of like-minded people somewhere out there. This is even more the case if what you're finding resonance with is clearly political—which is almost, if not always, the case in our fields of feminist studies or feminist, queer, intersectional approaches; then you feel as though your research might actually lead to some form of collective awareness, if not to social change.

It is with this tension in mind that I have read and written about, alongside the piece entitled “Finding a unicorn in the woods: The magic of collaborative care and resistance”. I hope to make this engagement both generous and honest, checking in with myself about how tensions play out in my own reaction to the piece: resisting the tendency to unfairly critique somebody else's approach just because it touches upon what I could consider “my field”, and, as such, becoming defensive; as well as resisting those thoughts of self-doubt which lead to the very anxieties and insecurities the authors speak about. Buying into the defensiveness or the insecurities would mean buying into the mechanisms of competition, individualism, and exploitation upon which the neoliberal university thrives (Chatterton et al. 2010; Harney and Moten 2013; Pereira 2016; Gill 2017). In resistance to these mechanisms of the neoliberal university, I strive instead to write from the same place of care and solidarity that the chapter by Emelie Larsson, Karin Larsson Hult, Lisa Ridzén, and Ida Sjöberg emerges from and addresses.

One last point worth mentioning when encountering each other's work in academia—as I am doing now with the piece by Emelie, Karin, Lisa, and Ida—is the issue of the different locations and roles of the various authors. In my experience, the issue of “generations” (i.e., of being from different historical generations or stages in one's academic career) too easily becomes a reason for hierarchical engagements with each other and each other's works. Not only is this one of the multiple reasons why I do not embrace the framework of a generational approach to feminist studies, but I believe that encounters among different (feminist) activists and scholars are encounters that provide opportunities to share our different knowledge and experience, where sharing entails a reciprocity of learning and teaching. And while this sharing is not free of tensions or contradictions, I believe it should and can be based upon trusting and caring practice; despite—or in contradiction to—the fact that the institution we are part of, the university, charges our roles with hierarchical levels of power and authority. As such, I write here from a position where—because of my experience as PhD supervisor, or being a more senior scholar than the writers of the piece—I could, and have been trained to, enter into a mode of criticism which focuses on shortcomings and inaccuracies; rather I want to enter in a conversation, an encounter, based on a relational feminist critique, understood as a mutual exchange, informed by care, empathy and horizontality (see, for example, hooks 1994, 2003; Maher and Tetreault 1994; Boler 1999; Puig de La Bellacasa 2017; Thiele et al. 2020).

Slow Scholarship: Productivity Or Resistance?

In the last few months, I have been busy—in-between all the other demands of my academic job, in the “free” hours such as weekends, evenings, while preparing dinner, or walking the dog—with thinking, but seldom writing, about slowness as a form of resistance in academia. Now, at the beginning of August 2021, as I am writing this piece, I am also writing an article that deals with slowness as a mode of attention and resistance in experimental observational cinema and neoliberal academia for an anthropological journal; both pieces have the same exact deadline, and I’m writing both pieces during what is supposed to be my summer holiday. I give this information not to complain, as that would be too easy, but to show some of the material circumstances under which we write, and especially to highlight the coincidences, and the timeliness of the resonances. At the same time, and since I remember, I have been working towards—or at least trying and hoping to be working towards—creating or contributing to collective, caring modes of doing feminist pedagogies and enabling spaces of embodied thinking, researching, and learning that resonate with what the authors of “Finding a unicorn in the woods” write.

For all these reasons, I hope it has become clear why reading this piece moves me intimately. I have never had the kind of special and explicitly collective experience during my PhD that the authors talk about. I’m also not a sociologist—I am an anthropologist, if we want to use disciplinary labels—and I do not have expertise in issues of space and geography. A part of me, while reading this piece, has been wishing I had had an Ånge-like space when I was writing my PhD. Luckily, I had various other kinds of feminist collective environments that helped me greatly in surviving the process of writing; although the kind of safe/safer space the authors talk about it is not how I would define the spaces I had back then. Aside from the differences, what really spoke to me while reading the piece was the confirmation that issues of speed are crucial to how contemporary academia functions. Still, I wish I had understood the importance of slowness as a political tool earlier on. And for this I praise the authors of the chapter for already understanding something so important in the initial stages of their doctoral research, and not more than eight years after the completion of a PhD. I understand issues of slowness and slow scholarship in part through similar frameworks as the authors of the piece. For example, scholars such as Mountz et al. (2015), O’Neill (2014), and Berg and Seeber (2016) present slow scholarship in a manner that resonates with me. Additionally, I think that scholars who address slowness from an angle such as slow cinema could also be very relevant to the points made in the piece to which I am responding. But obviously I am projecting my own field of expertise into this conversation. If I were to use my own perspective to further a dialogue about slow scholarship, I would say that slowness, as it has been theorised in cinema (see Jaffe 2014; De Luca and Nuno Barradas 2016; Çağlayan 2019) and can be experienced in certain kinds of film, can offer ways of attending to the world differently, ways “to see politically”, as it brings with it the critique

of speed, of transparent signification, and of linear teleological temporality. As such, building on all the scholars named so far, I see slowness as having the political potential to activate a different way of seeing and therefore a different way of relating to the world and to our social reality. When we consider how contemporary academia is founded upon speed and velocity (as discussed by scholars such as Burrows 2012; O'Neill 2014; Mountz et al. 2015; Berg and Seeber 2016; Gill 2018), slowness then is a political way of seeing that is disruptive of the normative—capitalist, neoliberal, colonial—mode that has been established as dominant in our consumption of media and films, as well as in our lives in and relationship to the university. Therefore, what I argue is that slowness and slowing down in academia enable practices of care and of listening (Vázquez 2012; Bourgault 2016), careful modes of attention (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017), and of being and working, which have the potential to be made into explicit and active modes of resistance.

As such, in my reading, slowness cannot really go along smoothly with a narrative of productivity, when we understand this word in the sense of a quantifiable/quick/quickly usable/profitable/efficient production (of knowledge) (see also Cambridge or Oxford dictionary definitions). Here, then, I understand production as being necessarily implicated with mechanisms of consumption, capitalism, quantifiable outputs, and measurable abilities. Therefore, the question becomes: how can we both speak of and practise slow scholarship and feminist care—and maybe even strive towards safe or safer spaces—while embracing or at least using a framework of productivity? The authors of the chapter also reflect on this, and our critiques of productivity—in part—resonate with each other's. However, they also write that paradoxically, creating a safe space for care and resistance has led to an increasing of their productivity, albeit not in traditional academic terms but a productivity of feminist activism. They further state they do not reject the idea of productivity, and their collective space might in the long-term increase it, as “productive unicorns”. This is where I disagree with the authors, as I would advocate for a critique of and resistance to productivity entirely. However, this tension also points towards my own contradictions of being at the same time—and more so in recent years—an active and paid instrument of the apparatus of the productivity, measurability, and commercialisation of neoliberal academia, while also thinking about and trying to resist these mechanisms through studying and practising feminist care and slowing down. Under these circumstances, then, what are the practices and modes of resistance I envision? I am forming quite a clear idea, and Ånge is a very compelling example; but I need to do more thinking and talking, so this is not the space or time for me to unpack them further.

Coda Or the Unicorn's Tail

By means of conclusion, I want to make two final remarks. There are several other resonances between me and the piece that I cannot elaborate on here;

but leaving these resonances unspoken might also testify to the never-finally-foreclosed, enduring and never-completed potentiality of feminist encounters. Finally, I am trying to wrap my head around exactly why the unicorn does not sit well with me. I love the queer and pop implications of it, but I also find it may be a bit too innocent or innocuous. I am sure unicorns can be fierce and powerful and maybe they even go in packs, but I'd rather be a saboteur (Haworth 2012), than a unicorn.

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