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Against the Clock

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Against the Clock

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*Time is the school in which we learn,
Time is the fire in which we burn.*

— Delmore Schwartz

The title of Delmore Schwartz's "Calmly We Walk Through This April's Day" aptly paraphrases the wishful thinking of university faculty every year as the spring semester draws to a close. For a profession so regularly caricatured as a leisure pursuit, the life of an academic increasingly endures the slings and arrows of time. Or a lack of it, to be more precise. We the teachers, scholars, and administrators of the academy know the complaint against speed all too well, the subject of so many grin-and-bear-it moments passing through the halls and more candid confessions behind the closed door of a trusted colleague's office. We simply don't have enough time to do what's expected of us. The end rhyme of Schwartz's poem, linking *bildung* with immolation, doesn't escape our notice.

Publications that question the sustainability of academic labor practices continue to proliferate, and the thesis of a mostly apocalyptic genre might best be summed up by the title of Frank Donoghue's *The Last Professors*.¹ For time poverty in particular, perhaps the most colorful treatment is Umberto Eco's "How to Spend Time," a brief essay in which the late polymath facetiously tallies the hours that he spends every year performing the tasks required of his employment as a professor. Resisting the view that scholars are "idlers," Eco alarmingly finds that in order for his tally to match the actual number of hours in a year he must give up the one or two minutes he devotes to smoking a cigarette a few times a day (122, 125). Taking a cue from Schwartz, Eco decides that he must put out his fire. The work of teaching and learning happens in an economy of scarcity, and the candle—or cigarette—burns from both ends.

Unique among the "state of the profession" publications, however, is Maggie Berg and Barbara K. Seeber's *The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy* (University of Toronto Press, 2016). Their thoughtful contribution to the conversation on academic labor is to challenge what often goes without saying: that it's good to be more efficient, to be faster, to manage as many tasks as possible at once. This is a risky move in itself, and it certainly has drawn criticism for what, to some, looks like a privileged call for ease from those who can afford to take on less work.² But Berg and Seeber mean for us to question what seems so commonsense that it passes for wisdom. In literature that seeks to remedy time poverty, for example, the focus always seems to fall on the individual: what they can do to catch up with everyone else (even though everyone else, it appears, also feels behind). When culpability lies with the slow, the virtue of speed is a given.

And Berg and Seeber carefully establish an ethical and political scaffolding for slowness that make it sturdier than it might at first seem. This slowness is not the mere absence of speed. It is not a lack of intelligence, ambition, or standards; an inability to organize or prioritize one's life; nor the donning of a threadbare, Jeff Lebowsky assurance that we'll all just abide. As Berg and Seeber joke, slow teaching isn't "s-p-e-a-k-i-n-g- v-e-r-y- s-l-o-w-l-y-" (33).

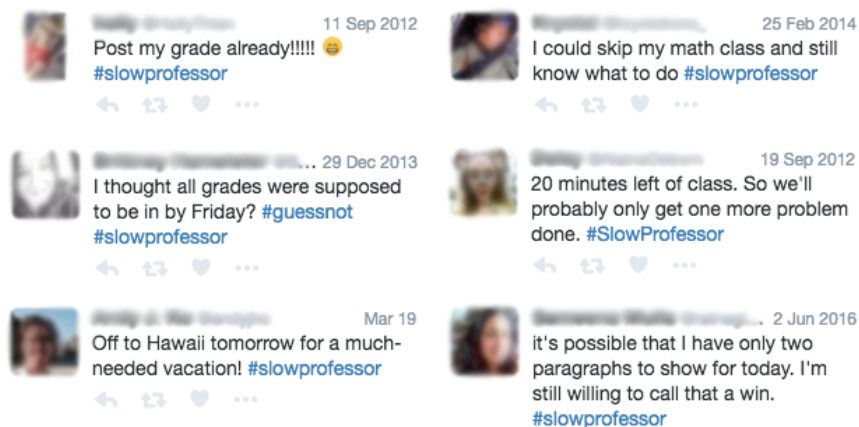


Figure 1: selections from a tweet search for #slowprofessor

In an act of true interdisciplinarity, they draw from the theories of the Slow Movement, and especially the Slow Food Movement, which is a fitting response to George Ritzer's social theory of McDonaldization and Martin Parker and David Jary's application of Ritzer's ideas to the organizational logic of the "McUniversity."³ As with the slow ideologies, Berg and Seeber position *pleasure* as the foundation of their intervention against speed. Pleasure, they note, is "antithetical to corporate values" that increasingly influence faculty labor practices (35). Slowness, then, isn't a *lack* of something, but a *presence* of pleasure: a quality of experience in the moment.

As a concept, pleasure is deceptively simple, but when we think about our deep entrenchment in rhetorics of complaint and narratives of decline, taking pleasure in our day-to-day work carries radical potential. Even more radically, slow theorists' notions of pleasure turn the focus from the self onto the world. Berg and Seeber most significantly cite Wendy Parkins and Geoffrey Craig, who define slow pleasure, *contra* hedonism, as a practice rooted in "attention, reflection, and care in everyday practices" (59). So much of what we might typically call pleasure falls outside this domain, where "the temporality of the consumer marketplace," in Kim Humphry's thinking, propels us to instant gratification and continuous acquisition (23). How dissimilar are the drives to cram as many tasks as possible into one day and to watch "just one more" episode during a Netflix binge?⁴ How can we reorient ourselves to time so that pleasure no longer walks hand in hand with speed and efficiency?

With respect to teaching and learning—*Greater Faculties* reviews these, after all—the most important idea that Berg and Seeber address appears not in their chapter devoted to pedagogy, but in a later discussion of collegiality and community, which responds to "an instrumental [i.e., speed-oriented] view of not only time but also each other" (72). Here Berg and Seeber draw from the ethical *raison d'être* of many slow theories, which Parkins and Craig sum up as "a different approach to time, which would include both time for the self *and* time for the other: an ethics of time" (47). It's important to recognize that in Berg and Seeber's vision, slow professors aren't just self-centered people taking more "me time" to treat themselves. Slow professors experience awe and feel the call to service in what philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas writes as the face-to-face encounter, or the face of the other.⁵ And while Berg and Seeber have colleagues in mind, for teachers this "other" is often a student.

In a speed-oriented academic culture, it's easy to instrumentalize our students in terms of the time that they take from our schedules. It's easy to instrumentalize them as grade distributions, attendance records, and ratings on course evaluations. It's easy to instrumentalize teaching itself as a necessary, yet unwanted adjunct to one's more serious (and maybe more self-centered) duties. As Jacques Berlinerblau writes in *The Chronicle*, many of us even think of teaching as a punishment for failing to keep pace with the culture of speed. It's a peculiar dystopia, this Thunderdome Academy where slow researchers are pushed into the arena of gen-ed and intro courses. One scholar enters; they never leave. Master CV runs College Town.

In a different essay for this issue I write about “how we see (or don't see) students as complex human beings,” and this might be another way of approaching how to grant time and space for the other in our own ethics of time as slow professors (15). How often in our interactions with students do we practice attention, reflection, and care? How might a slow approach to time and an emphasis on slow pleasure change our teaching styles and pedagogies?

As reviewers have noted, and as Berg and Seeber themselves reflect, *The Slow Professor* is unusually optimistic about a problem that usually inspires a dour outlook. Reviewers thus far have exercised commendable restraint in not connecting this tone with the well-worn stereotype of Canadian niceness that Berg and Seeber may or may not wear on their sleeves. Optimism indeed seems fitting for a slow culture, but I wonder if, conversely, *The Slow Professor* exhibits too much severity in its zeal to cast information technologies among the cadre of forces that enervate our efforts to be more

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present.⁶ I don't think that Berg and Seeber are calling for some kind of Luddite revolution, but I do worry that the urge to “unplug” in our professional practices might eclipse technologies' potential for transformative—and slow—teaching and learning experiences.⁷

That we're left room for our perspectives is part of the slow ethics of a book that crosses several genres: manifesto, cultural theory, political critique, exposé, self-help guide. And, true to the manifesto, it's a quick read, which would be ironic were Berg and Seeber not so conscious of the myriad (Sisyphian? Kafkaesque?) demands on their readers' time. As a manifesto, too, what *The Slow Professor* gains in gusto it loses in pragmatism on the ground, leaving us to the slow work of finding context-appropriate ways to practice what Berg and Seeber preach. We might wonder if all this slow talk is just a palliative when tenure and promotion criteria remain the same, when we need to maintain a workload to justify our pay, and when it feels like the world continues to leave us behind despite our moments of zen.

But *The Slow Professor* isn't just for professors, title notwithstanding. This is a book for academics in positions of power and influence: administrators, deans, chairs, advisers, and, yes, teachers, who still exercise authority in even the most student-centered classrooms. How can we practice slowness and pleasure in thoughtful ways for the good of our disciplines and colleagues and, more importantly, for those whom our decisions and actions affect profoundly? Good change is slow change, and this is perhaps where Berg and Seeber depart from the manifesto with its right-angled history and its disorienting, accelerating dialectic. *The Slow Professor* is a treatise to read deliberately; in the language of Parkins and Craig, we ought to consider it with attention, reflection, and care as we integrate its programmatic clarion call into our daily practices as teacher-scholars.

This is what it means for a slow professor to work against the clock: not racing the machine, but thinking outside of its logic altogether. Leading to the famous couplet on time and fire, Schwartz writes: “May memory restore again and again / The smallest color of the smallest day.” So may it be in a slow life, where calmly we do walk through the day.

NOTES

1. See Donoghue, *The Last Professors: The Corporate University and the Fate of the Humanities*, Fordham University Press, 2008.
2. See, for example, Robinson, “Slow Professors? Yeah. Right.” *Medium*, 4 April 2016, medium.com/precarious-physicist/slow-professors-yeah-right-539a1b84dd24.
3. Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society*, Sage, 2013; Parker and Jary, “The McUniversity: Organization, Management and Academic Subjectivity,” *Organization*, vol. 2, no. 2, 1995, pp. 319-338.
4. For example, the “fast” consumption of leisure in the Netflix binge is the basis of the A-plot in the *Portlandia* episode “One Moore Episode,” written by Armisen, Brownstein, et. al., directed by Jonathan Krisel, Broadway Video Entertainment, 2012. For an excerpt see www.youtube.com/watch?v=gzY7POVQhp0.
5. See Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, translated by Alphonso Lingis, Duquesne University Press, 1969, pp. 79-81.
6. Nicholas Carr, whose writing has become a touchstone for popular skepticism of digital technologies and the Internet (especially in the context of their effects on attention and cognition), plays an important role in Berg and Seeber’s assessment of technologies as antithetical to mindfulness and slow living. See *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains*, Norton, 2011.
7. The slow technology movement offers a promising alternative to the notion of technological advancement as the *de facto* adjunct of the culture of speed. See Lars Hallnäs and Johan Redström’s foundational essay “Slow Technology: Designing for Reflection,” *Journal of Personal and Ubiquitous Computing*, vol. 5, no. 3, 2001, pp. 201-212, <http://www.johan.redstrom.se/thesis/pdf/slowtech.pdf>.

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MEDIA

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