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Slow Singularities for Collective Mattering: New Material Feminist Praxis in the Accelerated Academy

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Abstract

The contemporary university privileges speed, precarity, competition, and performativity; it operates through modes of accelerationism, work intensification and productivity; and it is oriented to producing academic subjectivities rooted in self-commodification. Much of this is antithetical to feminist ethics and working practices which focus on care, relationality and working together. The article explores these tensions as a basis for moving forward with the question: What does a new material feminist approach offer as an ethical practice to work against these damaging conditions? In response, it proposes an embodied material feminist ethics (Barad 2007; Haraway 2016) of response-ability generative of alternative approaches to educational research, teaching and mentoring. Relating Isabelle Stengers (2018) insights on the generativity of slow to Gilles Deleuze's (1993) concept of 'singularities' it proposes *slow singularities for collective mattering* as a conceptual and practical means – as a material-discursive feminist praxis – to contest the un-liveable life of the neoliberal accelerated academy. In doing so, it makes the case for feminist work as an un/dutiful response-ability of nurturing decelerated forms of being which might help reimagine the aims and purpose of the university.

Keywords

Introduction

What constitutes a liveable life as a feminist in the accelerated university? This question prompts a second: As feminists who have managed to have something of a liveable life while navigating and contesting the inequities of the neoliberal university, what is our responsibility to our colleagues, to scholars less senior than ourselves, to our students, to develop modes of educational praxis that remain true to our individual feminist identities and to the collective

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feminist endeavour of effecting change? These questions engage multidimensional factors: philosophical, political, ethical, and practical/ pragmatic which are articulated differently in different contexts by particular people because, of course, feminism is a multiplicity. For some notable feminists, the commitment to doing feminist work has become incompatible with having a career inside the academy. Sara Ahmed is one well-known example of a high-profile feminist whose departure from academia followed some bruising institutional events and who has forged a successful career in the public realm since. The feminist scholars who remain and do feminist work in the academy do so in relation to a neoliberal higher education (HE) system which is characterized 'accountability, competition, efficiency, individualism and managerialism [which] deepens the disadvantages of women and ethnic minority academics in pursuing research, as well as those in small universities or in countries on the periphery' (Acker and Wagner 2017, 3). Much research exists to support this overall assessment of the unequal systemic effects of neoliberalism in HE (Angervall, Beach and Gustafsson 2015; Leathwood and Read 2015; Thomas and Davies 2002), while other studies highlight the effects this system has on the cultural practices of neoliberal universities. Thornton (2012, 3), for example, notes that the 're-masculinisation of the university' is endemic in producing forms of gendered behaviour which valorise stereotypically masculinist behaviours which, Morley (2016, 5) suggests, enable a 'virility culture' of competitive individualism to thrive, and which Leathwood and Hey (2009) see as marginalising the affective dimension of academic life. It is hardly surprising, then, that feminist scholars who stay within academia are so deeply concerned by the risks and resistances, the negotiations with and captures by, neoliberal technologies, structures and microparactices which, as Taylor and Lahad (2018, 5–6) note, produce the 'feminist academic' as 'inherently problematic' in the 'corporatized and commercialised neoliberal university.'

This article seeks to make a particular theory-practice intervention in these debates. It draws on recent work by Karen Barad (2007) and Donna Haraway (2016) to develop a material feminist conceptual framework which considers feminist responsibility in new ways – that is, as an embodied, relational, material and intra-active ethics of material moments in which normative neoliberal practices might be displaced in favour of new ways of attending to 'who matters and what counts'. The material feminist approach I outline is supported by a novel conceptual framework which connects Isabelle Stengers' (2018) insights on the generativity of slow scholarship as an ethical mode of deceleration, to Gilles Deleuze's (1993) concept of 'singularities' as unique and condensed events or 'material moments'. I use these conceptual

resources to propose *slow singularities for collective mattering* as a means to rethink feminist work in ways which help contest the un-liveable life produced in the neoliberal accelerated academy. The article also makes two broader interventions. One, it builds on long-standing traditions of feminist ethics of care. In this, it shares their concern with ethical action as a *in situ* practice, while adding to this work a focus on how embodied feminist labour when materialized as a processual and relational mode of response-ability – as a means of 'attunement and … rendering each other capable of unexpected feats in actual encounters' (Haraway 2016, 7) – helps rethink feminist care as a collective, affective and co-relational push-back against the conditions of the accelerated academy. Two, it develops ongoing feminist attempts to counter the denigration of the micro which has been, and continues to be, prevalent in mainstream-malestream sociological thinking. The central argument is that material feminist work, when undertaken in the response-able mode of *slow singularities for collective mattering* can rework ethical notions of feminist care and offer hope for new possibilities for feminist praxis in higher education.

What matters now? Fast careers in the accelerated academy

It may seem obvious to say that, in general terms, feminism and neoliberalism are not good bedfellows. Feminism is a social justice project, committed in theory and practice to the collective achievement of gender equality, and is often allied to the collaborative politics and praxis of other social justice frameworks including intersectionality, decolonisation, anti-racism, and ecological perspectives. Neoliberalism is based in commitments to competitive individualism and the centrality of market principles to social organization. While those general points make a useful beginning, it is worth looking a little closer at them, as a means to establish the basis of the argument I wish to develop.

First neoliberalism. Wendy Brown's 2015 book *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* interrogates the productivity of neoliberal ideology as a mode of 'political rationality' which has spread across educational institutions, social organizations and political life. Brown (2015a) argues that neoliberalism reshapes all forms of public and personal activity and conduct as economic, even when those spheres are not directly monetized, and suggests that neoliberalism is a rationality through which capitalism finally swallows humanity (Brown 2015a, 44). This has consequences at individual and institutional levels for higher education. Brown characterises the individual human figure at the heart of

neoliberalism as *homo economicus*, a social actor who is a 'market creature in every walk of life', a conceptualisation which builds on Foucault's idea of how biosocial technologies of the self shape our identities in particular ways. This 'financialised revolution in the human being' has taken hold in how academics orient themselves as 'individual entrepreneurs of our own life in every dimension of existence' (Brown 2015b). As academic 'entrepreneurial' subjects', or 'human capital' subjects, our social and political dimensions have withered away to be replaced by an orientation to self, purpose and and career based on one's current capital value and the investments one makes to enhance future value: a CV is a sign of investment ranking; teaching evaluations are about high credit rating amongst students; publications are a sign of productivity volume; and grants a sign of competitive ratings and future investibility. In all of this, what matters most is speed and quantity of output and impact. Filip Vostal (2016) suggests that the temporal modes of contemporary academia have been reordered in response to neoliberal conditions. As such, individual academics 'feed the acceleration machine of immediacy' (Vostal 2016, 24) with their 'fast career' in which busyness and speed, internal self-responsibilisation and external competitiveness, form the unquestioned background to our academic lives.

As well as re-shaping individuals, neoliberalism has recast the institutional logics within which universities operate. The 'economization' of higher education institutions can be seen, for example, in: the privatization and outsourcing of services; the deregulation of staff conditions of service; the proliferation of zero-hours, short term contracts and precarity across the sector; and the shifting of investment from staff and courses to facilities and buildings to attract paying student customers. More insidiously, economization is evident in the neoliberal appropriation of democratic, academic vocabulary – choice, growth, empowerment, autonomy – which works to erase other legitimate alternatives to economic rationality. These institutional logics articulate with wider national and international conditions which foster competition: the capture of students in a shrinking student market; national and global league tables; and the increasing hold of audit cultures (in the UK, the Research Excellence Framework and the Teaching Excellence Framework, for examplegovern academic lives and careers. The consequences of these conditions in producing physical and mental ill health have been documented (Berg et al. 2016), as has the affective economy of the accelerated academy in which fear, surveillance, performativity and individualized self-responsibilization combine in the disciplinary and disciplining conditions familiar to many academics (Leathwood and Read 2013).

Feminism and the neoliberal academy: Gender, the politics of knowledge and feminist ethics of care

In 1975 Adrienne Rich wrote of how university structures and disciplines privilege male knowledge and male bodies and how women in universities (and society) were both fragmented from each other and hierarchically dispersed in institutionally lesser roles than men, the upshot being that women were most often positioned 'in competition with each other and blinded to our common struggles' (Rich 1975, 6). As a means to address 'the inadequate and distorted corpus of patriarchal knowledge', Rich posits the 'woman-centered university' which would not only 'do away with the pyramid itself, insofar as it is based on sex, age, color, class, and other irrelevant distinctions' (6) but would also entail 'women shap[ing] the philosophy and the decision making' (6), thereby constituting themselves subjects and not objects as their socialization thus far required (6). Rich suggests that such feminist work is about 'human redefinition; not merely for equal rights but for a new kind of being' (6). This 'new kind of being' required, according to Susan Sontag (1973, X), two responsibilities:

> The first responsibility of a 'liberated' woman is to lead the fullest, freest, and most imaginative life she can. The second responsibility is her solidarity with other women.

These two responsibilities are, as I argue below, inextricably entwined.

Rich and Sontag have been designated as 'second wave' feminists whose feminism was rooted in structural critique and social solidarity for all women. Such totalising presumptions have been critiqued as emanating largely from White middle-class Euro-American feminists speaking 'on behalf' of other women. Since then, Black feminists, feminists of colour, postcolonial feminists, intersectional feminists, trans feminists, eco-feminists, and new material feminists have shifted 'feminism' into a dynamic and mobile terrain of political contestation, theoretical proliferation and innovative activism, while not denying the continuing feminist need to attend to enduring power differences and systematic inequities (Mohanty 2013) and to forge alliance across the barriers and boundaries erected to divide women.

However, while the popular resurgence of feminism as, for example, in the #MeToo movement founded by Tarana Burke (Brockes 2018), Slutwalks (Mendes 2016), the Everyday Sexism Project (Bates 2013), and critiques of rape culture (Mendes, Ringrose and Keller 2018) have widen the orbit for feminism beyond academia in mobile and energising ways, entrenched systems of masculinist, white power continue to play out in some deeply troubling ways in the neoliberal academy. For example: women are largely concentrated in high volume teaching roles; there are many fewer female professors than men across all institutions and all subjects and disciplines, particularly where women of colour are concerned; the prevailing conditions of precarity persistently affect women more than men; and gendered spread across disciplines remains largely intact as continuing calls to 'get more women into STEM' attest. This is despite the fact that 'female enrolment ratios now exceed those of men in two out of every three countries with data. The number of female students rose sixfold from 10.8 to 77.4 million between 1970 and 2008 in the global academy' (UNESCO Institute of Statistics, cited in Morley 2013, 18), and the numbers of women undergraduates slightly exceed those of men worldwide.

These entrenched gendered inequalities are intensified in the contemporary accelerated neoliberal academy which is discursively positioned in alliance with *post*-feminism, in which what matters (as discussed above) is performative achievement through individual striving, and feminine identity as constructed through ambition, confidence, hard work and success (Pomerantz and Raby 2017; Ringrose 2007; Taylor 2011). While post-feminism is not a unitary discourse, it works with the assumption that feminism is an already 'achieved project' whose collective feminist politics we can dispense with (McRobbie 2009), thereby aiming to de-politicise feminism (Harris, 2004). There is a wealth of feminist research which supports this. Taylor and Lahad (2018) show the prevailing structures of higher education as marginalizing and discriminatory particularly to feminists, women of colour, and emerging women researchers. Montes Lopez and O'Connor (2018) and Neilsen (2016) note how the representation of higher education as a meritocratic system in which the 'best' and the 'excellent' get the rewards for their labour promotes an ideological cover story for the perpetuation of gender, race and class and other inequalities. Not only do these conditions of entrepreneurialism, self-promotion, audit, performance management and accelerationism work against the equity imperatives of the feminist imaginary, they make the practices of doing feminist work extremely difficult, principally because they fragment feminist efforts at collaboration and diffuse feminist politics through unaccountable institutional arrangements

(Taylor and Gannon 2018, 466). In such performative contexts, feminist work can, too often, be either too easily co-opted to getting the next generation of women scholars to bend their minds and accommodate their bodies to fit in with the rules of the neoliberal game which continue to privilege white, middle class, able-bodied men, or prone to invisibilisation and stigmatised as lacking in legitimacy in academic structures which, through business-as-usual, promotes male voice, authority and achievement (Morley 2003). All of this has negative effects on women's career progression, on perceptions of our institutional value, and, more intimately, on our health, self-worth and identity.

The fear of becoming-incorporated – of enabling feminism to become complicit with established power structures in which 'success' is measured by the extent to which women 'fit into' a system ruthlessly marked by inequality, exclusion and damage – continues in tension with feminist urges to do work which disturbs, changes and transforms that system. This tension has shaped feminist efforts for a long time and can be seen in the 'activist-agitational feminist line' composed of the multiple and entangled histories of feminism (Black, lesbian, post-colonial, for example) which seek to reconfigure the academy through forming alliances to provoke change and which, as Stengers and Despret (2014) say, entails making a fuss. This is the line I speak into in this paper. One central political premise of this line concerns enacting a feminist politics of care through feminist praxis. I give a brief account of this here as it is central to my subsequent development of a material feminist stance on responsibility/response-ability and practices oriented to slow singularities for collective mattering.

An ethics of care has been central to feminist thinking for about forty years, and emphasizes both the importance of interpersonal connections and how ethical choices are often bound up with power. Noddings (2012, 232) positions caring as an ethical choice rooted in 'our responsibility to one another [based on] 'mutual and spontaneous regard.' Gilligan (1982) attends to the micropolitical practices of power, raising questions about whose voices are included, who is silenced, and how feminist spaces might be opened to hear expressions of feeling, emotion and affect. Importantly, feminists acknowledge that putting an ethics of care into practice is not a straightforward matter of treating all people the same but is about attending to women's different circumstances and to how power ebbs, flows and circulates (Taylor 2015). Feminist ethics see care as inhering in mutuality, reciprocity and relationality – modes of relation which assume, imply and require the practical enactment of a sense of

obligation and responsibility, even duty. Such mutuality thereby constitutes care not as a linear giving of care from active caregiver to passive recipient but a complex collective and interactive process of care flows and relations. Gilligan (2011, n.p.) explicitly identifies the political conditions, or context, within which a feminist obligation to care operates:

> A feminist ethic of care is an ethic of resistance to the injustices inherent in patriarchy (the association of care and caring with women rather than with humans, the feminization of care work, the rendering of care as subsidiary to justice – a matter of special obligations or interpersonal relationships). A feminist ethic of care guides the historic struggle to free democracy from patriarchy; it is the ethic of a democratic society, it transcends the gender binaries and hierarchies that structure patriarchal institutions and cultures. An ethics of care is key to human survival and also to the realization of a global society.

Situating a feminist ethics of care as an act of resistance which actively works to redress the inequities of patriarchy resonates with the activist-agitational line of feminism I mention above. It also aligns with Joan Tronto's elaboration of a political ethics of care whose expanded orbit urges us to include new materialist and posthumanist concerns (Bozalek et al. 2017). These concerns help frame a different orientation to care, one that expands to include materiality and practices of mattering as a collective instantiation of feminist response-ability in the accelerated academy. In this respect, Haraway's (2016) notion of response-ability marks a crucial difference to normative ethical considerations of responsibility. The latter focuses on care *for* and carries with it intimations of power-over and stewardship; its ontological presumption is of a subject/object relation.

Haraway's response-ability, in contrast, works with the ontological presumption of equality in distribution of capacities, albeit differential capacities; and foregrounds that what matters is the relational capacity to respond in order to render the other more capable. This rethinking of the matter of care positions care as ethical action, as an *in situ* practice of embodied feminist labour which is processual and relational. As such, response-ability materializes modes of bodily and affective 'attunement … [of] rendering each other capable of unexpected feats in actual encounters' (Haraway 2016, 7) and helps share feminist care as a collective praxis, as a co-relational push-back against the conditions of the accelerated academy. This emphasis on 'actual encounters' is important in prompting attention to that

which is often overlooked or passed over as momentary or is a one-off occurrence. Feminist thinking has made concerted attempts to counter the denigration of the micro which has been, and continues to be, prevalent in mainstream-malestream sociological thinking. Micro-instances matter deeply in enacting feminist response-ability in the spatio-temporal frames of the accelerated academy, a point which re-turns back to the central argument: that material feminist work, when undertaken in the response-able mode of *slow singularities for collective mattering* can, in enacting a material feminist ethics of care, offer hope for new possibilities for feminist praxis in higher education.

New material feminism: Centering matter to contest the damage of anthropocentricsm

Feminist new materialism is a burgeoning field oriented to bringing the material back into feminist theory and practice. Its aim is to take matter seriously, its central proposition is that matter is lively, not dull, dead and inert. Its starting point – that matter is alive and vital, that matter has energy and force – urges the need to radically rethink the ontological, epistemological and ethical bases that we (at least, those of us in the euro-american west) have inherited from the Enlightenment (Alaimo and Hekman 2008; Coole and Frost 2010, Grosz 2017). New material feminism focuses on the materialities of things, bodies, objects and spaces and how the human is co-constituted in and by their relations with matter (Taylor and Ivinson 2013). Barad (2007), whose development of agential realism is an important analytical frame of reference for new material feminism, explains that 'matter' and 'meaning' are not separate entities and that, contrary to post-structuralism which tended to focus on language too much, we need to do more to recognise the conjoint-ness of the discursive and the material. New material feminism is about attending to the thing-ness of things, the physicality of bodies, the somatechnics of thing-body relations, the chemical and biological bases of world-things-bodies and how these natural-cultural entanglements produce meanings, generate differentiations, and articulate new modes of mattering. In education, new material feminism has been taken up to explore gendered, and other, inequalities and processes of marginalisation, and how these materialise in nonhuman-human bodies, objects, things and spaces (Taylor and Ivinson 2013; Fairchild 2020; Gourlay 2019).

New material feminism centres a critique of the anthropocentric basis of white, western, Enlightenment thinking; in doing so, it decentres the human by placing the human in relation with nonhuman beings and the world. Like other anti-Enlightenment understandings, new

material feminism questions the presumption of human exceptionalism – the idea that we (humans) are rational beings, superior to other forms of life, and therefore able to use them for our ends. It also questions the sciences human exceptionalism has developed to 'prove' its mastery. Such science is based in the imagined boundedness of the individual ego (Descartes' *cogito*) which separates self from world, and which has produced knowledge-making practices based on: observe from a distance, intervene via testing, obtain 'results', produce 'laws' and thereby claim to know the way the world works (I exaggerate only slightly to make the point). The global exportation and dominance of such positivist scientific logics via colonialism, however, has had devastating consequences on non-western science, sensory, experiential, Indigenous and other modes of knowing, casting them as invalid and illegitimate (Higgins et al, 2019). New material feminism identifies three potent criticisms of masculinist, anthropocentric ways of knowing. First, that it has installed western narratives of progress and development which it has then 'measured' other cultures against only (of course) to find them 'lacking' 'immature' or 'backward', which then justified their violent repression or erasure. Second, that its reliance on a western version of 'reason' and science which positions humans as 'over and above' nature/matter has meant that use, consumption, appropriation and destruction of nature/matter is entirely okay as long as the knowledge produced serves human ends – thus, again, marginalizing other logics of knowing, some of which entail millennia of embodied experience, of living in relation with land, and honoring nonhuman ancestors. Third, that masculinist scientific thinking is the generalized the views of a small-ish section of 'mankind' (white, male, western, socio-economically advantaged, able-bodied) who have arrogated to themselves the 'god-given' mission to 'civilize' a whole series of 'others' whose humanity is either in question (Black, Indigenous, people of colour) or doesn't quite meet the required quality measure (women, children). I have argued elsewhere that the binaries, divisions, hierarchies and distinctions endemic to these masculinist modes of thinking are 'his triumph, his tragedy, and, through postcolonial, feminist, post-structuralist, or posthumanist eyes, a principal cause of his demise' (Taylor 2016, 10). The climate emergency, species extinction, migration crises, war, poverty and famine show the failures of this way of thinking, as does the academy's embrace, albeit at snails' pace, of scholarship which contests these Enlightenment hegemonies and, instead, seeks to pay more attention to alternative modes of knowing that reintegrate the false binaries the science of masculinist anthropocentrism so violently imposed: theory/practice, body/mind, body/brain, self/other, emotion/reason, human/nature, human/animal, man/woman, black/white to name but a few.

New material feminism's orientation towards rethinking what matters and recasting who counts is, I argue, important for feminist work in the accelerated academy. This is because the *telos* of anthropocentrism and its so-called 'humanizing' project as just outlined is thoroughly entrenched within the knowledge-making disciplinary practices of contemporary neoliberal higher education. Doing new material feminist work in HE matters because neoliberal accelerationism intensifies the divisions endemic to the humanist *telos* further. As Honan, Henderson and Loch (2015, 47) note, metrification and quantification of university bodies and their products often positions women and other non-normative bodies as 'lacking' and their achievements as lesser than those of men. Women, people of colour, and disabled people are at the sharp end of pervasive institutional demands to do more, better and faster which produces feelings of exhaustion, stress, anxiety and shame (Black, Crimmins and Henderson 2017; Pereira 2017). Doing new material feminist work also matters ethically. Humanist ideologies with their phenomenal grounding in the anthropos of individual bodies and abstract, universalising rights-based discourses has led to a cul-de-sac of environmental destruction that humans have thus far failed to take responsibility for (Taylor 2016, 2018a). It also matters because doing new material feminist work in the accelerated academy means refuting the bare, pared-down and quantifiable legacies of performative and competitive individualism and, instead, re-thinking ethics as a matter of relations, engagements, and entanglements of human, nonhumans and nature. In this more capacious understanding of ethics, what matters are practices, doings, activations, attunements and instantiations. That is, actions which put feminist ethics of care to work through material relational practices – not (merely) ethical codes to be adhered to or moral precepts. Doing new material feminist work is, then, an emergent ethics of moment-by-moment material doings productive of differences that matter. It is about reframing ethics so that, in affirmative mode, we widen how we think of 'we', we enlarge our considerations of what matters and who counts, and we include formerly excluded bodies –, human and nonhuman – in our efforts at social justice.

New material feminism: Knowledge, response-ability and interdependence

New material feminist shifts away from speciesism and anthropocentrism pose a fundamental recasting of the nature, orbit and scope of ethics and, more specifically, challenges how ethics gets done in the neoliberal academy. As indicated, re-thinking ethics as interdependence means understanding the human always in-relation and that means exploding the normative

categories and boundaries of self/ other – 'others' can no longer be thought of as 'others' but are, intimately and always, ourselves as the body multiple. As Braidotti (2013, 48) says:

> 'An enlarged ethical sense of inter-connection between self and others, including the nonhuman or "earth" others … requires and is enhanced by the rejection of self-centred individualism. It produces a new way of combining self-interests with the well-being of an enlarged community, based on environmental inter-connections'.

Barad (2007) places entanglement at the heart of her elaboration of an agential realist ethico-onto-epistemology, a mode of relational ethical-political knowing-in-being which does not separate and divide knowing from being and doing as traditional humanism (and the accelerated academy) do. Barad (2007, 393) says:

> We (but not only 'we humans') are always already responsible to the others with whom or which we are entangled, not through conscious intent but through the various ontological entanglements that materiality entails.'

She emphasizes that ethics is not about the 'right response' to an 'exteriorized other' but is 'about responsibility and accountability for the lively relationalities of becoming of which we are a part' (Barad 2007, 393). In similar vein, Bennett (2010, 37) suggests that 'ethical responsibility … now resides in one's response to the assemblages in which one finds oneself participating.' Envisaging responsibility as an ethico-onto-epistemological mode of entangled relations means. as Barad (2007) emphasizes, that knowing does not come from standing at a distance but from our material engagement with the world in its ongoing differential mattering. If knowledge is an ethical enactment in the world, then knowledge and knowing are about taking responsibility for the cuts we make. Knowledge is a doing in which what gets included and excluded is an ethical matter. This onto-epistemology recalibrates duty, responsibility and accountability as well as 'chasten[ing] our will to mastery' (Bennett 2010, 15).

The shift from responsibility to response-ability is key in all of this. For Barad (2007, 392), response-ability is not an act of will or personal choice but is, rather, 'an incarnate relation that precedes the intentionality of consciousness.' It is the ability to respond to what 'we' have to face, and the connections, commitments and consequences that emerge and are

produced in that act of facing. There is no 'outside space' beyond the self to sit in and gauge one's course of action, there is no external code to appeal to, because what matters is our 'ongoing responsiveness to the entanglement of self and other, here and there, now and then' because we are accountable for 'the exclusions that we participate in enacting' (Barad 2007, 394). This is why new material feminist work can be considered as an 'ethic of worlding' in response-able relational attunement to 'specific material reconfigurings of the world'. Haraway (2016) amplifies these points, urging us to take up 'response-ability' as an empirical ethical practice which instantiates obligation through a stance of being 'truly present'. For Haraway (2016, 1), being 'truly present' is a moral imperative: entwined as we are 'in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings'. As I take it up here, I see response-ability as a feminist praxis of care and concern based in an ontology of reciprocity, active co-presence, sensitivity and receptive openness. Such new material feminist reorientations are, I suggest, a necessary and affirmative ethical route for making reconnections across borders of species, nation, gender, race and class etc that the masculinist logic of western humanism has so wrongfully instituted. But how might this be enacted in 'actual encounters' to use Haraway's phrase in the neoliberal accelerated academy?

Knowledge as a politics of mattering: Expanding the potential for a feminist 'we'

To briefly recap: New material feminism offers a radical critique of some of the fundamental assumptions underpinning dominant ways of producing knowledge; it contests masculinist presumptions that we (humans) have the right to turn the world into an 'object' that we can observe, know and then subject to our (human) will. In new material feminism knowledge is situated, relational, experimental, contingent, embodied and emergent. It interrogates 'bodies of knowledge' in relation to cuts of gender, class, race, dis/ability, geography, culture. New material feminism foregrounds knowledge as a politics of mattering. Thus, curricula, pedagogy, teaching materials, research projects, conference discussions, article citation practices etc are considered as a materialization of what counts as knowledge and whose/which knowledges are privileged, excluded, ignored or ridiculed. Thinking knowledge as a politics of mattering creates a sharper focus on how knowledge produces differential effects so that certain people, groups, nations come to matter more than others, and encourages doing knowledge-ing differently thereby to enact ethico-onto-epistemological relationality. This, I suggest, is the ethical basis for doing new material feminist praxis in the accelerated academy.

I align this conceptualisation of new material feminist praxis in the feminist lineage of ethics of care and concern and ally it with Deleuze's notion of singularities, condensed events unique in their force and affect, and with Stengers' slow science, a philosophy oriented to relationality and reciprocity. I put forward 'slow singularities' as an ethico-onto-epistemological response-able knowledge practice, a situated politics of relational becoming which disrupts traditional masculinist, measurement-based, performative, accelerationist orientations. A new material feminist praxis of slow singularities works as a form of what Alaimo (2016, 30) calls 'inhabitation', that is, as a material ethics of bodily action which attends to one's location within 'wider networks of more-than-human kinship'. Inhabitation is about feminist praxis as bodily action, taken up in often hostile, even toxic, contexts in which injurious, incredulous, dismissive or even gently mocking responses to feminist work occurs, responses which demean the work feminist praxis aims to do, and which does affective (not symbolic) violence to the worker in effecting her diminishment for her efforts in redressing social and epistemic injustice. Important to note that a material feminist ethics of inhabitation does not focus on discourses *about* the body (as in the work of Butler and Foucault) but on the materiality of 'lived experience, corporeal practice, and biological substance' (Alaimo and Hekman 2008, 4) oriented to expanding the 'we' that 'we' might become. As Braidotti (2017, 185) reminds us: 'the making of a 'we' … is the subject of ethical and political change. Take a problem, then construct the assemblage, and keep working together.' The other thing is that, in new material feminist ethics, no-one gets off the hook: one cannot simply absent one's body or pretend that its doings are not yours! There is no hiding behind abstract ethical principles, no removing one-self from consequences, because all selves are ontologically entangled prior to action. What matters is what you do, how you relate, and thereby how you produce the world in its ongoing mattering in the here and now. It's as simple (and as difficult!) as that.

Singularities + Slow

The specificity of body, relation, location and politics that coalesces in new material feminist ethics accords with Barad's (2007, 185) assertion that 'each intra-action matters' (*intra-action* here refers to the fact that a new materialist ontology presumes we are all already entangled rather than separate bodies which then interact). It focuses attention on how feminist praxis materializes in the moments and minutiae of our ongoing relations as 'an

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ethical obligation to intra-act responsibly in the world's becoming' (Barad 2007, 178). Thinking new material feminist ethics via the generativity of moments – of each intra-action – means undoing some long-held presumptions of male-stream sociology that the macro is more important than the micro. Such assumptions rest on the (fallacious) view that the abstract laws of the macro are more important than concrete instances; that such laws are more 'objective' and therefore provides 'truths' and hence better explanations of what is going on. This patriarchal intellectual lineage of 'laws', generalisation and 'truth', deriving from the 'founding fathers' of sociology such as Durkheim, Marx and Weber, has long been critiqued as erroneous by many feminists (see Harding, Haraway) who point out that what is proposes as 'universal' truth and objectivity are predicated on the views of a small number of (male, white, western) men (as discussed above). New material feminists support and extend these critiques by pushing further at the importance of the micro, momentary, and processual. In this, they reimagine and gear to a feminist intent the micro-sociological line of Gabriel Tarde whose 'elemental sociology' (Tonkonoff 2013, 270) urges a proper focus on the molecular level, on the granularity of action, so that we can better attend to the specific manner in which the elements of practices are articulated and disposed in the contingent ensembles that emerge, how they are constituted and change during ongoing educational interactions.

In pursuit of Tarde's microsociology, Deleuze (2004) notion of 'singularities' replaces that of generality. Deleuze takes up 'singularities' from 15th and 16th century geographers whose travels showed them that the world was a much more varied, diverse and differentiated place than the historical, religious views of totality that the Bible had proposed. As used conceptually by Deleuze (2004), singularity refers to a 'condensed event', to events which 'vibrate', and which are unique but which also provide ground for relations. Singularities are decisive points and places where perception is felt in movement; they operate through potentials which when realised may develop movement along new lines of flight into new becomings, thinkings and doings (Borum 2017) A singularity is a microperception that opens onto or into a macroperception; it is a unique point *and* a point that opens to variation and difference. Singularities prompt attention to those moments which are time-bound and spatially-located, which might seem mundane, everyday, fleeting and quite 'ordinary' but whose force is realised bodily, materially and/or affectively, and which produce some profound moments of ethical engagement (Taylor 2018b). Focusing on singularities helps surface those 'small but consequential differences' Barad (2007, 29) speaks of which

highlight gendered politics in institutions.

In forwarding new material feminist praxis through such 'small but consequential differences' it is helpful, I suggest, to connect them to an ethic of slow. While the effect of material moments may be explored separately from an ethic of slow – as I did when considering the gendered relations of mattering produced through mundane materialities such as a t-shirt, a pen, a flipchart (Taylor 2013) or through how bodies are materially placed in classrooms (Taylor 2018b) – their value in materialising and recognising the force of feminist praxis in the accelerated academy is enhanced when connected with slow ontologies. Higher education scholars are embracing slow ontologies as a means to contest the shrunken containments of the neoliberal university (Bozalek et al. 2017; Hartman and Darab 2012) and some are making explicit connections between higher education, slow and posthumanist/ new material feminist efforts to develop sustainable and renewable practices through experimental, non-traditional research practices which take (small, because that is what's possible) steps towards attending and enhancing social justice for all on the planet, not just humans (Ulmer, 2017). Building on this work, the formulation of slow I offer is not merely about time, it is not about working at snail's pace. Rather, it is about deceleration as a means to create focused and nurturing ways of working against damaging conditions. It is about attending to, noticing, staying with the trouble, and doing what you can in inimical conditions in order to materialize ontological possibilities for new ways of scholarly being, writing and research. Taking inspiration from the Slow Movement, I propose slow as a commitment to alternative approaches to educational inquiry, one which creates spaces for relational care practices, which creates time for nurturing non-commercial forms of being, and which encompasses concern for nonhumans, along with the contexts and environments in which we work. Slow, in this formulation, instantiates a material ethics in one's daily academic life such that our bodily doings, relatings, knowings and sayings pose a feminist challenge to the entrenched inequalities that damage. This is not an individual endeavour but, crucially, a collective one – and which offers a call to re-make the university in a slower, caring and more collaborative mode. This is not/will not be easy. Yet the payoffs for our affective, material and physical health may be profound. As Black et al. (2017, 143) point out, slow offers 'more than [mere] survival', it offers work that is 'life affirming, joyous, meaningful, collaborative and celebratory' because it 'supports balance and our own and others' wellbeing.' In doing so, slow resists the relentless push for performativity, competition and individualization that is so damaging to feminist work in academia.

Isabelle Stengers (2018) situates an ontology of slow in *Another Science is Possible: A Manifesto for Slow Science* in relation to Science's capture 'by technical-industrial innovation', and argues that, while fast [experimental] science' has been positioned as a 'conqueror discipline' this has been at the cost of obliterating other ways of thinking. But Science's triumph is at the expense of its dissociation from values, and its inability to engage with ordinary publics because it has never fostered, or thought it necessary to have, a relation with them. A shift towards slow science is, in her view, necessary. Stengers' (2018) view Slow as a more responsible and response-able way of producing knowledge in the academy because it involves:

- An active taking into account of the plurality of the sciences' (52) and their concomitant different and heterogeneous multilogics;
- Inquiry as a curious and involved 'creation of situations that allow … new things to be learned' (61) because broader publics can be involved;
- Making connections between scientific 'value' with 'values' so that 'what is being investigated [has] the capacity to put at risk the question that is being asked of it' (65).

Slow, in Stengers sense, holds out much hope for new material feminist inhabitation and material ethics because it (a) recognises the value of 'other' ways of knowing; (b) places social values as central to processes of knowledge and knowing; and (c) is grounded in a view of knowledge as a situated politics of engagement. As Stengers (2005, 188) says elsewhere, recasting responsibility as a 'pragmatic ethos' of non-linear, non-causal attentiveness shifts ethics away from general principles to specific acts of 'tak[ing] the time to open your imagination and consider this particular occasion', because 'paying attention as best you can' is the most valuable (and ethically useful) thing to do.

Slow singularities for collective mattering: When each intra-action matters

My formulation of *slow singularities for collective mattering* takes off from this point. 'Slowness' is not an end in itself, it is about embodying an engaged ethic in teaching, research and academic work more broadly, which orients to praxis which is response-able, to practices which might make us more capable of resisting what the accelerated academy is doing to destroying us. Thinking and doing new material feminist praxis as bodily immersion in and active attunement to how each intra-action matters, in Barad's words, is a mode of

material ethics which might (just might) enable us as feminist academics to contest the 'imperatives of flexibility and competitiveness [that] condemn [us] to destruction'(Stengers 2018, 80). Slow singularities for collective mattering might, then, be a small step in the direction of the 'recuperating, healing and unlearning' (Stengers 2018, 81) that is so sorely needed in these days of fast academia and fast science, not to mention fast species extinctions, and fast global destruction. But, getting past fast to slow is not easy work in contemporary academia and, as Haraway (2016) so eloquently tells, such work is not a once and for all doing but an emergent and ongoing engagement in mangled, muddled and muddied past-presents-futures. It is, as she says, a 'staying with the trouble' in the hope that attending to the power relations and differences that produce how each moment matters, might enable something different to take hold.

How, then, might this feminist work be done in the accelerated academy? My own experiments and doings in this respect have been nothing other than forays conducted with hand-on-heart hope that what I-we do together might help make the task of ongoingness less burdensome, more affirmative. One such foray used curriculum co-creation practices on an undergraduate degree module so that students designed the content, sequence, structure and pace of learning. Not only did this shift me from centre stage and top of the teaching pinnacle as knowledge transmitter, it engaged students in an embodied materialisation of the curriculum that brought risk, curiosity and excitement to questions of the politics of knowledge. Students' questions – why include this and not that in the curriculum? – were directly concerned with who matters and what counts in and as knowledge production. This process could not be rushed. It took a whole three hour session to work collectively to design a module schedule; three hours of patient listening, negotiating, talking and planning in pairs, small groups and whole class, to achieve an end that all present could agree on.

This work was emergent, creative and energising and also, at times, wrought with friction. Some students did not find the process congenial and saw it as an abnegation of my 'duty' to 'teach them stuff'. To manage this process, I shifted into the role of choreographer, note-taker, encourager, diplomat and general all-round helper. I would not claim that power was done away with; it never can be – and power circulates amongst students just as much as amongst staff-students. But, in assembling their own curriculum through co-ordinated action, students were immersed in an embedded and embodied material-discursive enactment of mattering – of pondering how curriculum cuts, exclusions and inclusions come to matter and

how curriculum as knowledge production gets done in practice. It helped materialise that curriculum was something they can do and make, not as something done to them. It was a small shift but one which explicitly centred relationality, co-operation, connectedness and participation as an educational process and outcome rather than competitive individualism. The effects of such enactments cannot be measured; they are, instead, registered bodily and affectively felt. They appeared in the atmospherics of laughter and flows of energy that shaped the slow time of shared learning on that particular day. This one example of how slow singularities for collective mattering might work as a mode of response-able knowledge production can, I hope, at least begin to indicate the value of new material feminist ethics at the micro-relational level of educational practice in contesting the habitual workings of the accelerated academy.

Conclusion

This article has developed the argument that practices oriented to slow singularities for collective mattering situate response-ability as a material feminist sensibility and practice of care attentive to moments, events, happenings in the everyday time-space of academia. It builds on feminist legacies regarding embodied ethics and widens these to include materiality and nonhumans. From this, it formulates response-ability as a relational practice and bodily inhabitation which contests masculinist and humanist notions of ethics as abstract universals and as programmatic codes. It argues that response-ability thereby contests how power gets done in the minutiae of educational life and perhaps even works as a form of what Montez Lopez and O'Connor (2018) call 'stealth power'. In my view, slow singularities for collective mattering can be a joyful, subterranean and slow collective feminist practice for working against damaging bureaucratic enactments of power. The power of this agitational feminist line lies in its persistent micro-level work which, one moment at a time, undoes the habitual masculinist workings of the accelerated academy. New material feminist praxis, in this figuration, is material, ecological, connected, dynamic, subterranean. It is an enlargement of the scope and purpose of education to include matter, materiality and the nonhuman in its orbit, while focusing in on singularity-as-event, on the specificity of what is happening here and now in this encounter of a multiplicity of forces.

Stengers (2018, 81) says that 'slowing down means becoming capable of learning again, becoming acquainted with things again reweaving the bonds of interdependency. It means

thinking and imagining, and in the process creating relationships with others that are not those of capture.' Slow learning, Stengers suggests, is learning 'with others, from others, thanks to others what a life worth living demands, and the knowledges that are worth being cultivated' (Stengers 2018, 82). No system, however perniciously performative, accelerationist, and competitive, as is the case with contemporary neoliberal higher education, is a closed system. Massumi (2015,105) says that 'there is always a degree of freedom offering the potential for other emergences. There are always counter-tendencies … proposing themselves for amplification. There is always a margin of manoeuvre.' I end with the thought then, that perhaps new material feminist response-ability as inhabitation, as material ethics, as slow singularities, as the relational mattering of material moments, can open up a 'margin of manoeuvre' for ourselves, so that if 'we' – our students, colleagues and our nonhuman others – walk a feminist line, we can un/dutifully support each other in making feminist tweaks, modulations and counter movements. Together, then, we might generate feminist efforts to 'defy capture by existing structures [and] stream[…] them into a continuing collective movement of escape' (Massumi 2015: 105). This is hard and difficult work. It relies on an acknowledgement of our shared vulnerability as feminist academics. But if we can re-think doing our feminist duty as a refusal to 'become the master's tool' (Ahmed 2016, 55), then we may have the conditions for an affirmative material ethics of an 'altogether different sort from the self-interests of an individual subject' which will enable new modes of higher education doing, being and knowing to be forged 'out of injury and pain' Braidotti (2013, 130).

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