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The Ethics of Pace

I began writing this article a week after submitting my book manuscript to my editor (on time!) so it can be sent out for review. As a junior academic, part of my work is to prove my intellectual prowess by producing a book published by an academic press that very few people will read. I was working on the aforementioned book project while teaching a regular load of courses and performing service for four different academic units at my institution, in addition to the service I do outside the university. I don't say all of this to inspire any sympathy from you, dear reader; I just want to make apparent the regular conditions of my mostly charmed life in the academy. I get to set my own schedule and teach what I want, and most of the service I perform involves things I want to do. But this list of tasks delayed my writing this piece on the ethics of pace and crip temporalities—the irony.

Even beyond the academy, humans are feeling an exponential pressure to move faster and produce more efficiently, all in service to an imperative to survive that has been warped by capitalistic greed. This pressure exacerbates disability, creates impairments, and even leads to premature death. In Japan there is a name for this

“overwork death” phenomenon: *karoshi* (Nishiyama and Johnson 1997). Disability is not the problem; rather, the problem is society’s, particularly employers’, refusal to acknowledge the exploitation of our labor and body-minds. As we work under debilitating conditions, all in an effort to try to afford care necessitated by this heightened demand on our persons, a vicious cycle emerges, resulting in unnecessary suffering. Disability studies has continually asked us to rethink these demands on our bodies and time by reminding us that not all humans are able to move and produce in line with these ever-mounting societal expectations. Drawing on the work of disability theorists like Susan Wendell, this article addresses the unique challenges of creating an ethical pace of life for those multiply marginalized by race, gender, sexuality, and ability (Wendell 1989; Kafer 2013; Koppers 2014). I argue that, in our social justice visions of the future, we must radically reconsider our insistence on “jobs with dignity” and begin to question the meaning and need for jobs themselves. I argue for a reimagining of the ethics of pace, focusing on my own occupation in the academy and in the field of digital humanities (DH) as a necessary case study.

Pace of Life

Susan Wendell’s critical text *The Rejected Body* (2013) is where I first learned about how the pace of life impacts disability. As Wendell explains,

When the pace of life in a society increases, there is a tendency for more people to become disabled, not only because of physically damaging consequences of efforts to go faster, but also because fewer people can meet expectations of “normal” performance: the physical (and mental) limitations of those who cannot meet the new pace become conspicuous and disabling, even though the same limitations were inconspicuous and irrelevant to full participation in the slower-paced society. (59)

In other words, we make disability where there was none because of our need for speed. Our insistence on moving faster, both physically and in production, can actually slow us down as more people experience the drag caused by the friction of an impossible expectation of pace. And why must we move faster? To what end? The need to move quickly simply for the sake of moving quickly is not a compelling reason to do so. Capitalism’s insistence on profits over people seems to be a major force behind the seemingly unquestioned ethos to make us produce more and faster. I ask that we consider the ethics of this pace, particularly in the academy, where research has shown there are other ways, better ways, for humans to move.

This last piece, the application of the insights of academic research, is perhaps what is most fascinating to me as a researcher. Fellow academics have shown the ill effect of the quickened pace, and their work is transformed into advice that we do not follow. For instance, we have done studies that suggest sitting all day in front of a computer screen is having a negative impact on human lives, yet we continue to create and sustain jobs that require us to sit for most of the day (Owen et al. 2010; Tremblay et al. 2010). We have evaluated the impact of building design and fluorescent lighting on our mental health, yet we persist in designing spaces that do not alleviate their negative impact on us (Boubekri 2008; Hamraie 2017; Sterling and Sterling 1983; Pauley 2004). In addition to asking us to work within these literal structural impediments to health and happiness, the academy demands more and more output: more research that is evaluated by quantity rather than implemented into our institutions' strategic plans going forward. Institutions delight in the excellence that their scholars produce without actually considering the possibility that this work could change how we live in the world. Efficiency and productivity drive the pace of life, and the ethics of that pace—the demand it makes on the human body—is rarely if ever questioned.

So here I am about to tell you why I think we need to slow down, “move at the speed of trust,” as pleasure activist and organizer adrienne maree brown (2017) puts it,¹ even though it is not a strategy I currently fully employ. I am worried about the speed with which we are supposed to produce intellectual thought, even as I participate at and demand of myself an accelerated pace, evident by my impatience as I monitor the lengthy time from submission to publication of an academic work I submitted just weeks ago. I wrote about these unrealistic expectations I have of myself in a piece for the *Sociology Review* about academics with chronic illnesses and disabilities. I wrote about how imposter syndrome supported my internalized ableism, leading to overwork that has manifested as physical symptoms (Bailey 2019).

Despite knowing and feeling the material consequences of my overwork, I press on. I don't exercise as much as I should, and resting makes me anxious because I feel like I should be doing something, anything, to prove my worth in the academy. Like so many of us multiply marginalized in academia, this persistent attention to work is not just expected of us but a seeming necessity for our continued advancement. I want to shift this supposition, but I still feel mired in the reality of how things are. I write here to demand a different orientation to work and productivity even as I feel compelled to maintain my diligence. I ask you, dear reader, to do as I say, not as I do.

I begin by outlining the history of the academy and its Western patriarchal classist origins. I then discuss the retention of this hierarchical undergirding and its influence on the academy today, arguing that those who are multiply marginalized end up experiencing the bulk of the demands of the profession as manifesting negative symptoms on their bodyminds. I provide examples of how the profession is uniquely debilitating to those most marginalized within it, using case studies from the news. I discuss the “overwork death” of Thea Hunter, a Black woman trying to survive by adjuncting at three universities, and what this case reveals about how institutions play a critical role in the exacerbation and creation of disability and delimiting of life (Harris 2019).

Turning from problems to solutions, I build on the work of disability and Black studies scholars who are interested in rethinking the inevitability of these dire consequences on human life (Schalk 2018; Mingus 2010; Nishida 2016). By adopting an ethics of pace in our scholarly practice, I contend, we can disrupt debilitating patterns in academia and beyond. Finally, I argue for a slowed down DH that values moving at the speed of trust, which requires a more democratized relationship with time. Because DH is already attentive to collaborative scholarship, a slow DH would allow for moments of reflection so that multiple collaborators from different vantage points are valued (Lindblad 2017; moyazb 2017; Ceglie 2017). I offer the model of slow DH as a “possibility model,” to use trans activist Laverne Cox’s (2014) term, for an ethics of pace in the academy that is attentive to how race, gender, sexuality, class, and ability inform our work together. Slow DH has the potential to be an evocative example for other fields. I privilege process over product, arguing that the way we treat each other through our work is much more important than the resulting output. In other words, as disability justice theory teaches us, the end never justifies the means.

White Men in Ivory Towers

When I think about the beginning of the university and academic thought, white male philosophers in togas with laurel wreaths on their heads spring to mind. The word *academy* comes from the Greek *akademia*, a place of higher learning initially devoted to the wisdom of the goddess Athena. That the goddess’s place in the history of the academy would be written out is not surprising given the intensely patriarchal and classist culture of ancient Greece (Blundell 1995; Cantarella 1985; Winkler 1990). Plato and his followers have become the prototypes for professor and student. This life of the mind of able-bodied white men, aided by a social structure that gave them

the freedom to think all day, is important for contextualizing the academy as it exists currently. The academy was built on the invisible labor of the women and other marginalized people who did the work of life so that these philosophers could enjoy a life of the mind. Referring to the roots of academic inquiry, feminist scholar Sara Ahmed (2016) wrote that the philosopher's writing table, through the "concealment of domestic labor," makes it possible for the white philosopher to be able to write unfettered by the work of maintaining a house. His ability to think all day and write is directly connected to the unacknowledged labor of those who remain outside the scope of his philosophical musings.

This history informs how universities are run to this day, with the invisible labor of the custodial staff, the support of predominantly female academic staff workers, and even the behind-the-scenes labor of women and other romantic partners not factored into metrics of success. Because white, able-bodied men are still imagined as prototypical scholars, institutions have been slow to ameliorate the different needs of a new set of academics. Parental leave policies are absent or only recently put into effect, as universities have been forced to grapple with the fact that some scholars have children and need time to take care of them. Accommodations for staff and faculty with disabilities are required by law, but the architecture of most institutions predates these mandates, forcing disabled staff, faculty, and students to get around campuses as best they can. Additionally, cultural biases in higher education persist, with policies that police the appearance of campus community members who are not white, straight, and Christian (Morgan-Smith 2018; Bauer-Wolf 2019). It is abundantly clear that the Western academy was built with certain people in mind: cisgender, white, able-bodied men who had wives to do the work of life for them. Many of my academic friends, including myself, are unpartnered and without roommates. We do the work of keeping a home—a full-time job in itself—while also juggling the demands of academic life. Not only that, but household, extended family, and community demands are greater on those of us who are multiply marginalized.

As most academics of color and women can tell you, it is painfully obvious that the academy was designed to be an Old (White) Boys Club. Our presence was hard fought and won, but not without casualties. We often have to do double the labor of our white male counterparts to be recognized. I cannot enumerate how many CVs of young scholars of color, many of whom are women, as well as white women, are twice as long as their full professor white and male colleagues because they are expected to produce more and prove themselves in ways previous generations of academics never had to.

Debility and Death in the Academy

This extra work, the additional work of having to do twice as much to be in the same standing as white peers, can produce an unrelenting self-flagellation in pursuit of tenure and promotion. It is never clear how much is enough, so you just keep going in hopes that it is more than what is expected of you. But even then, after all of that work, sometimes it still doesn't work out. The tenure denials of Kimberly Juanita Brown, Aimee Bahng, and Lorgia García Peña are material examples that doing all and even more of the things required for tenure is no guarantee you will get it if you are a woman of color (Flaherty 2014, 2016; Wilson 2016; Taylor 2020). The "twice as good" narrative that so many of us grew up with does not prove enough all the time.

The most painful illustration of this reality is not these tenure denials but the premature deaths of scholars of color. The list of prominent Black women scholars—including June Jordan, Audre Lorde, and Barbara Christian, all gone too soon—is enough to sound the alarm, but unfortunately, they are not alone. The death of cultural studies scholar José Esteban Muñoz at just forty-six still weighs on the minds of many colleagues of color. One of these premature deaths rocked me to the core: Thea Hunter, an adjunct professor at the New School and several other New York and New Jersey institutions, died in the pursuit of a livable life within the academy. Hunter died alone and overworked by an academic system that cared only about what she did for the institutions she worked for and not about Hunter herself.

In a long-form article in the *Atlantic* titled "The Death of an Adjunct" (2019), author Adam Harris explains the accumulation of bad breaks that led to Hunter's untimely death. The sense that one tenure-track job wasn't right led her to quit that position and move on to a visiting appointment and then later to adjuncting between three different institutions. Hunter was run ragged. With no health insurance, trouble breathing from chronic asthma, heart problems, and a persistent cough, Hunter tried to manage her health with a lone albuterol inhaler. She managed to get herself to the emergency room, but it was too late. The overwork and lack of care took Hunter's life.

Harris does an incredible job of detailing the vulnerabilities of adjunct faculty but only briefly acknowledges how race and gender impacted Hunter's situation. He makes a point to discuss Hunter's research on slavery as unique and even "pioneering" but does not discuss the unique factors women of color face in the professorate. For example, Black women are met with scrutiny from peers and students, sometimes even bullied into chang-

ing grades by colleagues who would rather appease a vocal white student than support their Black woman colleague (Wilson 2012). In addition to being subject to heightened surveillance by the institution, Black women are also expected to do a disproportionate amount of service labor, such as mentoring students of color and women. This mentoring, while essential for students, is not valued toward Black women's promotion and tenure (Wallace et al. 2012). Black women are doing additional uncompensated labor, often at the expense of their research agendas, making it that much more difficult to achieve tenure.

In addition to these likely but unnamed struggles, the day-to-day trudge from New York City to Connecticut, coupled with a department that wasn't the right fit, added up to Hunter needing to leave a coveted tenure-track position. Hunter was willing to risk underemployment rather than stay in a situation that didn't work for her. That said, working between three institutions with no health insurance didn't really work either. The travel between institutions and the grading and teaching requirements of each were too much to bear. In a situation like Hunter's, *karoshi* is not unusual—it seems almost inevitable, given the demands of scheduling, travel, and health concerns.

That universities with multimillion- and multibillion-dollar endowments refuse to pay a fair wage and benefits to faculty and staff is ridiculous. According to the National Association of College and University Business Officers, the New School's endowment is nearly \$400 million as of 2019, and New York University, another school where Hunter adjuncted, had an endowment of \$4.3 billion (*US News and World Report*, n.d.; Suneson 2019). These institutions have the resources to more than equitably pay for the work they demand of their instructors, yet Hunter died without health insurance. Institutions want to save money and extract as much labor from employees as possible. But institutions are made up of people. What happens that people become overly invested in productivity and forget to think about the human cost of the pace of life at an institution or institutions?

I argue that, with the increase of the pace of life in society writ large, so too has come an increased pace of life in academia. Students expect immediate responses to emails, as do other faculty and staff. Administrators rely on multiple-choice student evaluations to help determine professor pay. Graduate students are expected to enter the job market with at least one published peer-reviewed article if they expect to find a tenure-track position (Kafka 2018). The impact of these demands is a heightened sense of anxiety because it seems that every task is urgent.

Slow DH for a Diverse Academy

In my collaborative DH work, I have not been able to force things to move faster than the speed of trust. Author adrienne maree brown (2017) offers nine principles that inform her beliefs surrounding organizing through building trust. Principle 7 calls for people to “focus on critical connections more than critical mass—build the resilience by building the relationships.” If we invest first in relationships among people, it won’t matter that we are few in number. We need to prioritize the work of growing bonds among people before attempting to do more complex organizing. This principle is a testament to the collaborative nature of an ethic of pace and the need to move at the speed of trust. This phrase means, for example, that before you plan an action to occupy the utility company that has unfairly raised monthly bill rates, the members of the community organizing that action need to trust and be comfortable with one another. Here, the speed of trust is used to connote a slowing down and a need to nurture relationships before trust is established. The plans will fall apart if we move faster than people can depend on one another.

My work in the DH has been a revelation of this reality. As I wrote in my 2015 article for the *Digital Humanities Quarterly*, I have thought of the people I interview for my research as collaborators and not research subjects. In that sense, my collaborators and I all have an investment in how the research is conducted and in the results. This also means moving at the speed of trust in our interactions. Because I was known to many of my future collaborators as a Black queer woman interested in digital organizing, I was trusted before I was understood as a researcher. My organic relationships, built and nurtured over time, established a credibility with future collaborators that I do not think would have been possible without these connections.

DH as a field is already primed for this sort of collaboration, given the staff and faculty who generally work together to create digital projects. Librarians, engineers, and faculty have been the collaborative architects of many of the DH projects that are central to the field. Including community members as part of this already collaborative team means incorporating elements of participatory action research that allow for community interests to be served, not just the researchers’ interests. Participatory action research is a process-oriented research method that fundamentally shifts the top-down approach to research where scholars study a community; instead, participatory action research works with a community to cocreate research that is mutually beneficent (Rodriguez 2019). When we include community collaborators from the beginning, our research is all the more impactful. In what

follows, I provide two examples from my own research that I think illustrate this principle more clearly.

In writing the manuscript that delayed this article getting to the editors, I formed a community advisory board that consisted of Black women and femmes who use social media platforms for social justice organizing. This small cadre of collaborators helped me shape my research questions and challenged me to be more mindful about the information I shared publicly from my research. I was so focused on how their collaboration was useful to me that I didn't think about how the collaboration would be useful to them. As I wrote in a piece for *Digital Humanities Quarterly*, one member of the group utilized the collective to help with her own journalistic writing. I had never considered that the group members might find the collective useful for their own needs (Bailey 2015). This experience was a lesson in the power of collaboration and scholarly humility. By allowing this community to build trust among one another, it transformed into a group of its own making and its own needs. If we as scholars get out of the way, we can make room for other important connections to happen among collaborators. My own research was strengthened by the connections the group made with one another, which was possible only because of the extended time provided by bringing a group together digitally. When there were some errors in the article once it was published, no anger or animosity was directed at the collaborator who wrote the article. The trust we built meant that a simple mistake would not derail the relationships formed, whereas I imagine that if an unknown journalist had made similar mistakes, it might have been interpreted as intentional and handled with less grace.

I created the advisory group before even writing the prospectus for my book. Thus, these relationships have been able to build and grow for nearly six years. Both the slow building of trust that occurred, before I even thought about this research and invited collaborators into it, and the trust that was cultivated by creating a collaborative space together opened up new possibilities in my research and theirs that we never could have anticipated. An ethics of pace that moves at the speed of trust protects against possible disruptions because people and processes are more important than profits and products.

Most recently, I worked with coauthors Sarah J. Jackson and Brooke Foucault Welles on a book called *#HashtagActivism: Networks of Race and Gender Justice* (Jackson et al. 2020). We all come from different methodological traditions, which we brought together to achieve this text that none of us could have written individually. The speed of trust we built with one another

developed over different timelines, as Jackson and Foucault Welles had collaborated previously and I was “new” to Northeastern University and the collaboration. A feminist faculty writing group that Jackson established while an assistant professor at Northeastern allowed us to learn about one another’s work and our shared interest in hashtag activism. Over the course of these weekly writing sessions we got to know one another better and felt compelled to collaborate.

In the process of writing *#HashtagActivism*, we knew we needed to include the voices of the hashtag activists that motivated us to write the book. We solicited hashtag creators and paid them for short contributions in which they discussed their relationships to hashtags they started or used. Additionally, as someone who had worked closely with Twitter users as collaborators before, I wanted to give the users whose tweets we referenced a more transparent experience with academics using their tweets in scholarship. We wanted to provide notice that we had used their tweets and give them an option to opt out of seeing their handle or exact words in the text. With the help of our research assistant Kristen Miller, we collected every handle used in the text, and for every personal noncelebrity account, we reached out directly to seek consent to use the handle and tweet in the book. This process took some time but was essential to our ethos to move at the speed of trust.

My community collaborators from previous projects have dealt with the appropriation of their writing and thinking by people who used it for their own gain (Bailey 2015): academics using their tweets and blog posts in scholarly work without telling them; journalists aggregating tweets to make a larger point without checking in with the Twitter users about it, and inadvertently driving a whole new cadre of people to their Twitter timelines without their consent. BuzzFeed had been a particularly egregious offender on this count in the past. Stories of theft, co-optation, and invisibilizing the labor of online content producers have made me extrasensitive to how I conduct my research moving forward, making sure I do the work to acknowledge collaborators as coproducers of my scholarship. In celebrating the hashtag users who inspired the book, one of my collaborators, Foucault Welles, and I were celebrating a different digital activist each weekday by sharing that activist’s handle and hashtag. We understand our work to be in collaboration and possible only because of their innovative use of the tool.

DH is not the only field attempting to do this important collaborative work, but it is the one I’m most familiar with and where I see the built-in potential to move at the speed of trust. In both of these examples, the people

and the processes by which they are engaged are essential parts of the scholarship. An ethics of pace means that the ends do not justify the means but, rather, that the means are the ends. By remaining attentive to the people involved in our research, keeping the human at the center of DH, we can create a process that does not cause harm, or at least reduces it. The pace of life and the pace of our research are something humans can control. We can make decisions to push back on expectations of overwork through how we design our research and, when we are in positions of power, the kinds of scholarship we value for promotion and tenure.

Those of us who are department chairs and part of national organizations in our respective fields can advocate for the importance of collaborative scholarship. In the 2015 collaboratively produced white paper “New Ecologies of Scholarship: Evaluating Academic Production in the Digital Age,” for example, I and colleagues Ryan Cordell, then assistant professor in the Northeastern Department of English; Elizabeth Maddock Dillon, professor in the Department of English; Julia Flanders, professor of practice in the Department of English and director of the Digital Scholarship Group; Benjamin Schmidt, then assistant professor in the Department of History; and William Quinn, then a PhD candidate in the Department of English, worked together to come up with new ways for the humanities to embrace digital and collaborative scholarship. One of our suggestions was to look to the physical sciences, where labs and research agendas are prioritized over individual paper output. We wrote: “The lab is an incubator for ideas that can focus on work in progress rather than ‘works.’ Collaborators can work together to mature ideas to the point of circulation” (Bailey et al. 2015: n.p.). Our hope was that administrators and professional organizations could use this document, and the crowdsourced comments it generated, to reimagine promotion and tenure guidelines with respect to digital and collaborative scholarship. Northeastern University has begun to take these suggestions seriously, as collaborator Ryan Cordell achieved tenure on the strength of his digital projects and not the generally expected monograph within his field.

I’m grateful to the editors of this issue of *South Atlantic Quarterly* for allowing me to move at the speed of trust to get this article to them, much later than initially promised. In the weeks of my writing this article, the world has been immobilized by the ever-spreading novel coronavirus known as COVID-19, which is forcing humans to slow down whether they want to or not. Once again, disabled activists have been at the forefront of offering best practices in this moment of uncertainty. Disability justice (DJ) organizer Leah

Piepzna-Samarasinha (2020) created a prepper guide for surviving in this moment and beyond. DJ scholar Aimi Hamraie (2020) has been instrumental in sharing accessibility resources and practices to faculty who are scrambling to figure out how to teach their courses online. The late Stacey Park Milbern (2020) and her Disability Justice Culture Club used Facebook and Instagram to organize local communities in Oakland. These practices are not considered DH by some academics, but to me they personify the ethos of the transformative DH I believe in, especially as we teeter on the edge of the end of humanity.

The ethic of pace I want moving forward in my life and in my academic work is a slow and sustainable pace, one that moves at the speed of trust and is not driven by capitalistic imperatives. The excess speed with which we are expected to move, the death of Thea Hunter, and most recently COVID-19 are all clear and unambiguous signs that the way we are living is not sustainable. We must pivot and change how we relate to each other. We must slow down to survive.

I have been so moved by the digital videos of Italians singing together during quarantine or exercising together from their apartment balconies. This moment is a reminder that human beings are capable of profound transformation if need be, and the need is undeniably apparent. I believe we must transition our ways of relating to our work, to our scholarship, to how we live, if we are to survive. The end of life as we know it is not a distant possibility but an inevitability if we continue to operate as we have. We must focus on building the critical relationships that will sustain us and not the failing capitalistic infrastructure that champions the individual.

I see my decisions as a researcher and scholar within DH shaping how I want to relate to all people in my life. I want to move at the speed of trust and afford my collaborators the respect and consideration that I want as a fellow collaborator. Our positionalities are not without an imbalance of power, but when this reality is acknowledged, this privilege can be leveraged for good. I hope to continue to collaborate, and I hope that this moment reminds us how important it is for all of us to do the same.

Note

- 1 The “speed of trust” comes from former CEO and corporate motivational speaker Stephen Covey, who used the concept to talk about the increased sales speed that results when a company is trusted by consumers. As described in brown’s book, the “speed of trust” is augmented from Covey’s initial use by community organizer and strategist Mervyn Mercano, who calls for a shift in focus on critical connections between folks invested in creating social justice.

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