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Outline

There have, across differing contexts, been many hands-on and how-to-do texts on writing retreats for academic staff at higher education institutions (see for example Grant 2006; Moore 2003; Murray and Moore 2006; Knowles and Grant 2014; Murray 2015). While these are helpful for both facilitators and participants wishing to engage with writing for publication in retreats, they do not necessarily provide readers with novel ways of re-imagining such events. Furthermore, many of these texts tend to take for granted the neoliberal conditions under which higher education is currently operating, which has led to the corporatisation of higher education (Berg and Seeber 2016). This means that they tend not to question the consequent imperatives to publish as quickly and as much as possible, or recognise these as part of the neoliberal requirements. Unfortunately, such instrumental obligations have the effect of occluding issues such as the quality of the publications, and the amount of preparation which is needed before coming to writing retreats. It is almost as if a writing retreat has been appropriated as a 'fixit' solution for these purposes and become part of the endeavor to get academics to churn out as many publications in as little time as possible.

This presentation considers the implications of such requirements, and the effects that performativity and productivity in relation to publication at writing retreats may have on scholarship. It also proposes an alternative way of viewing and conducting writing retreats. This alternative is in the form of a Slow scholarship, which originated in the Slow food movement, and which has been replicated in architecture, urban life and personal relations. Slow scholarship and pedagogies have been brought to attention in academia by writers such as Isabelle Stengers (2005, 2011) who has argued for Slow science. A Slow scholarship in the form of pedagogy has been further considered by writers such as Hartman and Darab (2012), as well as by Berg and Seeber (2016) and Martell (2014), who have also written more globally about the Slow academy and university. Slow scholarship, including a Slow ontology for writing has been considered by Ulmer (2016) and from a feminist ethics of care by writers such as Mountz et al.

(2015). Slow practices in reading and writing are those which encourage hesitation, thoughtfulness and new ways of relating, for readers and writers at writing retreats. These practices have also been referred to as the ‘politics of slowness’ or Slow scholarship, which is seen as being both political and historicized (Berg and Seeber 2016; Garey et al. 2014; Mountz et al. 2015; Stengers 2005, 2011; Ulmer 2017).

What we need, I argue in this presentation, is to re-imagine the writing retreat as an event where Slow scholarship can be practised using particular processes of reading and writing which would support this form of scholarship. In order to achieve Slow scholarship, I propose the use of a diffractive reading and writing methodology, as developed by Karen Barad (2007). Diffractive reading involves close, attentive and care-full readings of each other’s work in order to affect and be affected as ‘readerlywriters’ ‘becoming-with’ each other in writing retreats. This diffractive methodology of reading and writing can be regarded as part of a response-able pedagogy, where writers intra-act with each other in their mutual becomings as writers and readers. A response-able pedagogy incorporates the ability to affect and to be affected. Here I am using the concept ‘affect’ from a Spinozist viewpoint, rather than seeing affect as emotion in the everyday sense of the word (Massumi 2015). To affect and to be affected are not two capacities, as Massumi reminds us, but they go together and refer to manoeuvrability, the ‘where we might be able to go and what we might be able to do’ in every present situation (2015, 8) – which, in this case, is with our writing and reading. Another way of putting this is to ‘render each other capable’ (Haraway 2016, 1) through ‘becoming-with’ our readings, writings and feedback to each other.

Giving and receiving feedback in writing retreats in flattened rather than hierarchical relationships and across disciplinary boundaries provides a richness for diffractive readings and respondings, and opportunities for being affected by and affecting writing practices. Academic tradition generally requires a distance from the subject under question, where one viewpoint is pitted against another, and others’ views might even be parodied. This dissatisfaction with critique expressed by Barad in her interviews (Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012; Juelskjaer and Schwennesen 2012) has resonances with Bruno Latour’s (2004) suggestion that ‘critique has run out of steam’. Diffraction is proposed as an alternative to these sorts of critique, offering instead affirmative, detailed and care-full practices of reading and writing. Diffractive methodologies allow us to rethink practices at writing retreats – opening up and enabling practices that ‘make a difference’ (Barad) for becoming writers at these retreats. Diffraction draws attention to processual ways of affecting and being affected by each others’ writing, showing how reading through the fine details of texts, with close and loving attentiveness, may provide an affirmative way of entangling ideas and engaging with the material-discursive to encounter differences that matter for the becoming of readerlywriters and writerlyreaders. An example of how such a response-able pedagogy has been attempted at a writing retreat is elaborated upon; Google Drive and face-to-face encounters were used as part of an apparatus and is discussed in the presentation.

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