

AFFECTIVE CAPITALISM IN ACADEMIA

REVEALING PUBLIC SECRETS





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Academy in my flesh: affective athleticism and performative writing

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Introduction

This chapter aims to explore the affective dynamics of contemporary academic capitalism that academia has gone through in neoliberal and market-oriented times. After the introduction – more than 25 years ago – of the term 'academic capitalism' by Sheila Slaughter and Larry L. Leslie (1997), it is now widely used to understand the global reach of changes connected to processes of alliances between university, industry and government in higher education and research policies (Etzkowitz, 2016; Holmwood, 2016). We follow the definition of academic capitalism as a knowledge/learning regime (Slaughter and Rhoades, 2004) that shapes academics' conduct while baring the roots of collective and democratic forms of participation.

In particular, along the lines of Chapter 1 in this book, we are interested in exploring the ambiguities and ambivalence of academic capitalism that affects the psychic reality of academia, seducing those who work in it. For example, the expression 'in the mood of data' (Staunæs and Brøgger, 2020) expresses with great effect how data have become infrastructural to academic moods. Academic performance data, such as scorecards, barometers, graphs and other materialising media, have become part of academia and of us living in academia. They are designed to affect and direct behaviour through forms of exposure, comparison and self-monitoring that are deeply entangled with a vulnerable affective economy. We intend to contribute to the critical literature that denounces the inequalities of academic labour and contrasts the voice of neoliberalism sustaining the political rationality of the market and market forms of relations (Jessop, 2008; Giroux, 2011; Bozeman and Boardman, 2016; Bottrell and Manathunga, 2019).

In this chapter, we interpret the neoliberal, corporate academia as the icon of an affective economy in which affect takes the place of money. Within such a context, academic practices of management through affect produce intensities rather than identities.

The theoretical framework of the chapter is delineated through the concept of affective economy, and is grounded in the literature on affective capitalism. Avoiding a definition of 'what affect is', it follows instead the traces of 'what affect does'. We follow the Deleuzian interpretation of affect, as elaborated by Brian Massumi (2002) and widely adopted within post-qualitative methodologies, where a precarious consensus on the meaning of 'affect' is constructed around the idea that it is processual, relational and situated. Affect can be described as a moment of intensity, a reaction in/of the body at the level of matter, and affectivity is formulated in terms of 'to affect/being affected', with modes of intensification, movement and capacities. We are also inspired by the works of Thrift (2004) and Sara Ahmed (2004), where affect is conceived as extradiscursive and extra-textual. Moreover, to indicate to the reader our approach in this chapter to affect, we share the words of Simon O'Sullivan (2001: 128, emphasis in original), who writes that 'affect is a more brutal, apersonal thing. It is that which connects us to the world. It is the matter in us responding and resonating with the matter around us. The affect is, in this sense, transhuman'.

This chapter is to be considered an experiment in collaborative writing (Wyatt and Gale, 2014), in which we three authors write in turns, with the intention of performing the concept of academic affective athleticism in our lives and writing.

Affective athleticism and managing self-managing

In this chapter, we read 'affective capitalism' in the context of contemporary neoliberal academy, assuming that the term 'affective capitalism' refers to the affective structures of capitalism and new ways of making profit and exercising control in post-Fordist capitalism. In introducing affective capitalism in a special issue of *ephemera*, Tero Karppi and colleagues (2016: 2) quote Massumi (2002: 45): 'The ability of affect to produce an economic effect more swiftly and surely than economics itself means that affect is itself a real condition, an intrinsic variable of the late-capitalist system, as infrastructural as a factory'. They go on to define affective capitalism as 'a broad infrastructure in which the emotional culture and its classed and gendered history merge with value production and everyday life' (Karppi et al, 2016: 5).

The ambivalence and messiness of the interconnection of affect and capitalism is, in our opinion, better served by the term 'affective economy' (Bjerg and Staunæs, 2011), which links governmentality studies and the 'affective turn'. The authors use the term in relation to the psy-leadership trend, now spreading to educational institutions, which addresses the affective aspect of management practices with a focus on managing the intensity and quality of human relations.

In our opinion, academia is a good example of an affective economy that works through the production of intensities, rather than identities, and whose

main social process is the economisation of affect through management of the self-management that has historically characterised academic work. Our aim in this chapter is to explore how 'managing self-management' is done in practice and through bodies.

The precarisation of academic jobs, the control of workloads through a 'publish or perish' logic, and the disciplining of academic bodies through the gendered embodiment of knowledge related to appearance and performance are only some of the practices in use in the academic context in that academics not only endure, but also actively produce with the management of self-management. The management of self-management, write Helle Bjerg, and Dorthe Staunæs (2011: 139) 'works through complex intra-actions between reflexivity and affectivity, within an ambiguous affective economy of both negative and positive affects. This ambiguity is the prerequisite for producing not only self-managing subjects who can handle themselves in the actual situation, but also self-improving subjects that create even better versions of themselves'.

With the term 'affective economy', we wish to stress how the engineering of affectivity is the effect of recursive, intensifying practices of management and self-management through affect. This means that individual acts do not produce the affective economy, but collective practices produce intensities of practices. Within this theoretical framing of the affective economy, we link the turn to affect to the turn to practice (Gherardi, 2017). Therefore, we shall consider how intensities work, in concrete and particular ways, how they mediate the relationship between the psychic and the social, and between the individual and the collective.

Affective economies need to be seen as social and material, as well as psychic (Ahmed, 2004). Training the body and the soul for 'academicity' (Brunila, 2016) here refers to the core practice that anchors other practices (Gherardi, 2019) in the affective economy of contemporary academia. In fact, Kristiina Brunila's concept of 'performing academicity' (a concept derived from Petersen, 2008) stresses how the becoming of a professional self is a process, where being a culturally intelligible academic is 'understood as a citational and reiterative discursive practice within multiple and contradictory power–knowledge relations' (Brunila, 2016: 386). We shall enlarge this understanding of academicity, taking into consideration not only discursive practices but also the socio–materiality of situated practising, in which such materials as 'publications' have agency when entangled with academic bodies, discourses and other socio–materialities. We can then look at academic training as a regulated process of repetition, involving control, self–management and passion, where the body and its affective capacity is central.

To illustrate this process of 'becoming with' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987 [1980]), we propose elaborating the concept of 'affective athleticism'. Gilles Deleuze draws the term 'affective athleticism' from the title of an essay by

Antonin Artaud (1964), in his book *Le théâtre et son double*, in which the dramatist outlines a novel method of conditioning the actor's body through breath control techniques. Artaud writes that we must grant the actor a kind of affective musculature that correlates with physically localised feelings. The actor is a real physical athlete, but with this surprising corrective that the organism of the athlete corresponds to a similar affective organism, and which is parallel to the other, which is like the double of the other, although he does not act on the same plane. The actor 'is an athlete of the heart' (Artaud, 1964: 195), and just as the athlete's body must be trained to organise and conquer the physical attributes of her/his body, the actor must train his/hers to develop a similarly muscular virtuosity and affective control.

Deleuze modulates Artaud's concept in a subtle but significant way. Affective athleticism is described as a process of shaping the forces of 'sensation' into sensible and durative form. For Deleuze (2014), sensation is distinct from the human subject who experiences it: sensation is simply vibration. Just as Artaud's affective athleticism allows the actor to traverse the orders of the physical body and immaterial emotion, Deleuze proposes that sensation passes from one 'order' to another, from one 'level' to another, from one 'domain' to another. In *What is Philosophy?* Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1994) take up the concept of affective athleticism and sensation again, writing that 'sensory becoming is the action by which something or someone is ceaselessly becoming-other (while continuing to be what they are)' (1994: 177).

We can easily draw an analogy between the affective athleticism of the actor, and what in another domain of activity – academia – is required to harmonise with academicity 'in the right way'. Becoming a recognisable and passionate subject in academia (Davies and Petersen, 2005; Petersen, 2008) means learning how to present oneself according to gender and appearance, speak jargon, write in the appropriate way, think and feel in a professional submissive way and contribute to the diffusion of an ethos of passionate attachment to academia in the face of its normalised misbehaviour. Moreover, if the academic fails to produce the right kind of academicity, the responsibility remains with the individual.

How do passionate attachments to particular practices of staging academic identity, including notions of right and wrong, competence and incompetence, come about? How are some of these passionate attachments socially sustained, materialised by norms, rules and physical objectivation? How do they colonise the flesh, while other notions are more easily rejected? How is the *desiring* subject produced?

Academic affective athleticism is a concept that enables us to inquire at the same time into (a) the training of academic bodies, just as athletes train their bodies to meet standards of excellence, and (b) the development of an affective musculature, as actors train for a performance in which their embodied knowledge of how to affect and be affected by an audience is realised. In considering performance in relation to art performing, we like to recall Deleuze and Guattari's conception of affective athleticism in relation to art and the sensations that art induces, since we wish to focus on the socio-materiality of disciplined bodies and induced affects that contribute to the reproduction of an affective economy through the managing of self-managing practices.

In analysing the performance artwork *Que le cheval vive en moi*, in which an artist and a horse shared blood, Leon Hilton (2013: 508) describes how 'the "affective athleticism" of the performance – the intense and intensive movement that arises at the point "where thought rejoins the body," and where the human passes through the animal to rejoin the immanent plane of matter itself – is also its most radical aesthetic intervention'. In fact, we wish to paraphrase the title of Hilton's analysis, *The Horse in My Flesh*, to describe how another non-human entity, the academy, is inscribed in human flesh. Academic affective athleticism illustrates the vibration of 'the academy in my flesh'.

The concept of 'flesh' (Merleau-Ponty, 1968) is relevant for an affect and practice lens, since it foregrounds the human's pre-discursive experience, which is prior to the schema of rationality and language. With this concept, Maurice Merleau-Ponty describes the intermingling of subject and world as intelligent embodiment and the interrelationship of inner and outer, the mutual mingling of touching and the tangible, the seer and the seen, the toucher and the touched. Flesh points to the circulating capacity of affecting and being affected by the sensorial.

In the next section, we experiment with the image of the 'academy in my flesh', focusing on publications as the main artefact connecting the inner and outer world of academicity, and with the use of the concept of 'academic affective athleticism' to interpret how academic bodies are shaped by specific practices and disciplined to manage self-management.

Practices shaping academic athleticism

Publications are the main artefacts through which a researcher becomes a recognisable subject in academia. Publishing is perhaps the most important practice to learn when entering the academic scientific community, crucial to learn in order to advance. In this regard, academic practices are imbued with a rhetorical fetishisation of making knowledge visible

through outputs and traceable practices, including participation in research projects, publications, being named on grants, supervising research students, and other 'markers of esteem' that literally and metaphorically raise individual profiles, and constitute the self as currency. To be *research*

inactive, by implication, is to be invisible and in deficit according to current audit logics. (Garforth, 2012: 279; original emphasis)

Hence, academic writing is full of affective implications that are not limited to the process of publishing but extend to the socio-material relationships within the wider academic infrastructure. Writing, and then publishing, are 'experiences' in the sense of referring to 'academic subjects who constitute themselves and are constituted as experiencing subjects' (Brunila, 2016: 387). This makes sense, especially in relation to the 'publish or perish' logic: I publish, therefore I am. This machinic circulation of affects and effects shapes important aspects of who we are as academics, but it is not something external to us. 'We are necessarily imbricated in the machine's assemblages' (Henderson et al, 2016: 6), which actively constructs what counts as 'fact', as well as determining what objects to fetishise. The following vignette illustrates the process of academic athleticism as it becomes inscribed in the flesh.

Vignette 1

The transition period between completing a doctorate and finding a permanent academic job can be one of the most challenging periods of any academic career. Every academic career path is different, depending on the disciplines as well as on contextual factors related to the university to which you belong. For example, it might be normal to spend several years gaining post-doctoral experience, often in a series of fixed-term posts, before finding a permanent academic role. For the luckiest, the passage from PhD student to lecturer is painless, occurring like an automatic promotion onward to the academic career peak, full professorship. In this *climbing journey*, sooner or later a question occurs that worms into and affects one's own thoughts: how to advance? How can I make the next step? Securing a permanent position is thus not necessarily the end of the *academic adventure*, at least not for those aspiring to reach the *top of the mountain*, career-wise.

For me (Michela) the question was: how can I make the step from senior lecturer to associate professor? I considered it 'natural' to ask this of senior colleagues who already did so. They explained that I would have to meet with the research director, and receive their approval to apply. A negative opinion would not prevent anyone from applying for a specific position, but it would be unwise, and go over badly with the faculty board.

On the same day I pondered all this, I happened to meet the research director in the breakroom. Quite common in Scandinavian workplaces, the breakroom is especially important in Sweden, given its association with the Swedish *fika*, or coffee break, tradition. *Fika* is a social phenomenon, a

legitimate reason to set aside a moment for quality time with coworkers, friends or family. So why not start a *fika* conversation with my research director?

After exchanging the usual courtesies, I did not hesitate to ask for a meeting: 'You know, I'm considering applying for the associate professorship, and I was informed that you are the responsible for assessing my curriculum and recommending my application. Should I send you my resume so we can meet?' I was confident in expecting an answer along the lines of, 'Yes, do that!', which would have brought me back to my office to write the application, strongly motivated and determined to submit it as soon as possible. The research director shattered these expectations with words that remain engraved in my memory: "Well, you know it depends on your publications and on the impact factors of the corresponding journals". 'Publications' and 'impact factors' suddenly acquired a material concreteness, like bullets, bouncing in my ears. They violently clashed with the vivid embodied memory of the fatigue accumulated to date, building an international and interdisciplinary scientific career marked by a constant effort to adjust my work to different literatures, methodologies, languages and academic practices. However, it took a fraction of a second for me to rationalise my emotions and translate them into the only words I dared to pronounce at that very moment: "I don't agree: you know very well that I'm working at the boundaries of different fields, and that my publications often address niche topics that do not have the same thematic resonance as themes discussed in big communities like yours". But my words did not soften the research director's take, and nor did the fika smooth the rough edges that the conversation revealed. "Indeed, Michela, they are exceptions" (meaning, 'the works targeted to those niches cannot be considered as important as publications in high-ranked journals'). After all, I should have guessed: the research director's view on what matters, what, literally, counts as scholarly virtuosity, was common knowledge.

This short consultation continued, but the words 'publications/impact factors/high-ranked journals' had already affected my enthusiasm, and reconfigured the scenario I was expecting. *Climbing* now appeared harder than expected, despite my arduous years of prior *training*, in another country, at another university. *That day the air was rarefied more than ever before*.

This story is told from the perspective of one of the authors (Michela) who experienced what Hugh Willmott calls the 'strangulating effect' (2011: 431) of an academic environment increasingly regulated by metrics, algorithms and calculative practices (see also Chapter 10, this book). Becoming an associate professor, and becoming an academic in general, is a *climbing journey*, an *academic adventure* towards *the top of the mountain*. It is an embodied experience that produces intensities, a *vivid bodily memory of the fatigue*, while the subject projects him or herself in 'relationships of difference and displacement' (Ahmed, 2004: 120) at the boundaries of different fields. Becoming an academic

is a flesh-and-blood process of knowing (Bispo de Souza and Gherardi, 2019) 'arising out of and continuously enmeshed in webs of actions' (Wacquant, 2015: 2) to *adjust* him or herself to perform academicity 'in the right way'.

Other metaphors may describe how academic careers are not standard paths, and how personal stories intertwine with work life in an unpredictable and heteroclite way, producing intensities that 'affect and move us in different ways' (Brunila, 2016: 388). Despite its inevitable subjectivity, this vignette typifies the dynamics of the neoliberal, corporate academia. 'Universities are not separate worlds, but reflect the societies they are part of. They are like micro models of political economies participating within broader webs of power' (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2014: 6), embedded in the 'technocracy of metrics' (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2014: 13).

Nowadays, scholarly and scientific work is increasingly regulated by situated practices that constitute expertise and subjects through specific technologies of governance. The power is delegated to objects like metrics to calibrate research quality and, accordingly, to define what matters to affirm one's own scholarly virtuosity. Lists of academic journals, and 'list fetishism', are deemed to 'discriminate quality in a manner that conveys an impression of impartiality and objectivity' (Willmott, 2011: 430). Hence, such objects have a certain moral authority because they are assumed to impose the criteria of scientificity (Introna, 2016). However, objectivity inscribed in research practices as a value 'serves to evacuate political objections but also passion, commitments, rage, and many other gendered, and racialised, affects' (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2014: 9). Indeed, academia has historically built its authoritative voice on a male subject embodying the norm ethnicity of 'whiteness' (hooks, 1994), at the risk of marginalising those who do not perform the 'right identity' or who do not appear to be appropriately repeating and confirming the norm (Petersen, 2008). Exceptions prove the rule of Grand Theory, which is concerned with 'developing generalities, typologies and abstractions', and 'if we try to engage in research that is different to the norm, there is a danger that we are criticized and rejected for not contributing to theory, not doing rigorous (ie, "scientific") research, and end up in the far corner institutionally and academically' (Cunliffe, 2018: 1429–30). Such academic practices enact infrastructural barriers that are inherently conservative and especially 'biased against new, unorthodox, and interdisciplinary paths, knowledges or approaches that tend to appear first at the margins of disciplines' (Star, 2002: 109).

The tension between resistance to all forms of 'domination' (Baaz et al, 2017) – including the commodification of knowledge, the fetishism of algorithms, the discursive truth-regimes and normative orders of status quo – and the 'prostitution of scholarship' (Ingold, 2011: xiii) to build an acceptable CV trains academics in a daily practice of affective athleticism in an attempt to meet peers' and managers' expressed (and unexpressed)

expectations. It is an ongoing performance made of rules and procedures to create, learn and apply, dashing between meetings, abundant templates and spreadsheets to complete, email correspondence (sometimes requiring a response within 24 hours per university regulations) and so on, and so forth, until *the air rarefies*. The metaphor of 'asphyxiation' (Willmott, 2011: 438) invoked in the first vignette is not at odds with the implications of academic fetishist practices to manage subjects and their artefacts in a predictable, time-saving, and apparently objective, way. Academic athleticism is also embodied and embedded in other affectively intense objects, as illustrated in the next vignette.

Vignette 2

While pondering how to approach this chapter, I (Magnus) happened to read a review of a new book about the collars of formal frock coats (Sigroth-Lambe, 2019):

Both teachers and students started to wear academic coat collars in the mid-1800s. A special embroidery in silk was attached to the collars. The local tradition of academies and universities determined the patterns. Today, there are only two embroiderers who master the art of embroidery on coat collars, where one is active in Lund and one in Uppsala.

In the book, Tom Lundin, who is otherwise a professor emeritus at the medical faculty, has gathered facts about the academic coat collar's background, appearance, and use today, as well as historically.

No wonder that this newspaper article appears in Uppsala, site of Sweden's oldest university (dating back to 1477), I thought, nor that the two embroiderers were situated in Uppsala and in Lund, home to the country's underdog university, itself founded in 1666 (in order to make southern Sweden more Swedish and less Danish, according to legend). Despite lacking embroidery on my own collar, I had previously noticed these special distinctions, and understood their vague connection to seniority, without paying them much notice. Instead, 10 years ago, I was quite happy to merely pass my dissertation and earn the right to wear a doctoral hat, the most prominent academic sign of my promotion at Åbo Akademi University (ÅA), Finland, where I received my PhD. As a member of the business school faculty, I am sorry that I did not get to wear a sword, which would have been cool. Nor was I granted the further privilege of being permitted to choose execution by sword, in the event of being sentenced to death. I suppose that in such circumstances I would simply be shot. Nonetheless, I am happy to say that I didn't receive a death sentence, and my colleagues

instead presented me with the insignia of the business faculty to wear on my hat, something I very much appreciated.

Back in Sweden, working as university lecturer, I learned that modern ÅA was not so old as I believed. Legend states that ÅA was founded, most importantly, before Lund, in 1640 (this time, in order to civilise what was then Eastern Sweden). Instead, ÅA was founded in 1918, and the older institution moved to Helsinki in 1827, where it became Helsinki University, a story my colleagues at ÅA somehow failed to tell me. After my return to Sweden, it also became apparent that I had no real use for my doctoral hat, except for very special occasions, such as formal dinners and social events. In fact, in everyday life, I lacked the most prominent sign of my doctorate, the ring proving to cognoscenti that I am, so to speak, 'married' to science. As this crippled feeling lingered on, I went to a goldsmith and ordered a ring, where I had to choose the right kind of pattern of oak leaves that represented the faculty of my PhD. Strangely, no one asked me for a diploma, or proof of my right to wear such a ring. I simply paid and walked out with it. Does the same go for embroidered collars, one might wonder? Do you just order and pay for them, or is there a specific procedure to acquire this specific sign of prominence?

I didn't find an answer to this question in Tom Lundin's book (2019), but I noticed that his book is just one volume of ten published by the University and Student History Society. This series includes lessons about 'ribbon tails' (frackband, supposedly for carrying your imaginary sword), student farce traditions, student songs, other academic and student societies and stories about leaving Uppsala. Even considering these few topics, becoming and being an academic in Uppsala appears much more involved than having the right to buy a ring or a doctoral hat.

Finally, I can also disclose that ordering your embroidered frock coat collars requires no special procedure. You simply pay, just like with the ring. No proof whatsoever is required. When I call her and ask, Annika Karp² – the tailor in Lund who specialises in academic embroidery – tells me that anyone showing up wearing unearned collars would be noticed, and the ensuing public disgrace prevents misuse. I am also welcome to place an order, she says, when it is time for me to show my own collars. Then she hangs up.

Post-vignette 2: wearing the wrong collars?

As one might suspect, this second vignette was written by a different author (Magnus) than the first (Michela). The two of us differ in academic background and interests, country of origin and gender, to mention a few things. Most noticeably, however, in our vignettes and our approach to texts, we do not fully share a point of departure, or language. We also relate differently to the literature used for this chapter, as well as to the theme of

the book. Our differences became quite clear working on this text, where I (Magnus) have struggled to fit myself into the apparent tradition established by the exclusive club of researchers who seem theoretically more closely related to this book's theme. But my relation to the subject rather comes from my practice as a scholar, or, to use the terms of this book, how I feel the sickness of academia 'in my flesh'. Occasionally, I resent having to adapt in order to fit in. Sometimes I become childish, and, just to be contrary, do unexpected and inopportune choices. Why can't I just grow up?

Of course, I am aware of this glitch in my persona. It is why I seek opportunities to develop my self-management skills in areas identified as academic weakness (and by God, are they not plenty?). It is why I wanted to be part of this chapter. I wanted to explore (and discipline?) myself in less-travelled terrain, and learn from those more experienced than myself. Every time I turn my attention to the project, the intensity rises, and with it my concern: how do I make our collaboration a rewarding one, and not shame my co-authors? How do I balance self-control with passion, not to say anger and resentment? Experiencing and overcoming these intensities is important.

You will thus find no attempt here at a clear theoretical dissection of the above vignette. Instead, I move into the twilight zone, as the vignette takes a life of its own and turns into a post-vignette, not sure of its status, or of what this part tries to be. Am I wearing the wrong collar?

Turning back to the second vignette, it describes a variety of practices to which academics not only attend as part of their profession, but also organise their lives around, and even write books about. Many of these practices are deeply connected with seniority and tradition. Experience indicates quality, but sometimes age alone seems to matter. Age has a value in itself, where newcomers are expected to follow the present trajectory till death, and into the afterlife. A university founded in 1477, 1640, 1666, or situated in a town with 16th-century Tudor houses, as described in the introduction to this chapter, means something and provides an affective academic atmosphere. Writing a book about leaving your historic university town behind is not at all absurd, but somehow expected. Departure and loss stir affect. Metaphorically, Elvis has left the building, and thus has his flesh lost attachment – the building is less Elvis and Elvis is less building. Academicity is thus not bounded to an academic profession, but is instead a state of becoming, being and leaving, and saturates our lifeworlds, our retirement and our afterlives. Publications like the books in the vignette not only spread research results; they also memorialise and uphold ideas inscribed as important, sometimes centuries ago, that still have an affective presence and currency. We, the academics, uphold this market, and have done so for a long time before neoliberalism or the marketisation of education. Of course, market and influence exist, but it would be naïve not to recognise the old, stale pond we swim in.

As academics, we express ourselves and therefore create artefacts that evolve in time and feed a core marketplace for affective capitalism in academia. What drives affect can, to some extent, be attributed to the intimate relation between academicity and a specific use of language, usually described in this context as objective theory detached from subject. Yet they remain attached. Both theories and their concepts instead appear as 'quasi subjects' in the academicity we pursue, and they do that as their use stirs affect. But can I use a specific concept, such as 'quasi subjects', freely? What was Bruno Latour's intention when writing about the concept, and does that matter? Is there a mainstream of thought that determines the 'correct' use of the concept? What right do I have to express the concept, even to love it ... and what affects do these last few sentences stir in you, as a reader? Does this text make sense to you, interest you, make you angry, bewildered or something else? Is your stomach active, does your heart rate change, as mine does while I search body and soul for the right expressions? Do you now feel ashamed for me, or, having detached yourself from what you read, are you indifferent?

Theorising, which in this context can also be viewed as the organisation of sought micro intensities, is a most value-laden word, incapsulating potential affect for whomever it touches. Lines are drawn, connections made and bridges burned. Whom should I quote and refer to, in order to stir desired affects? Maybe this is the most 'athletic' practice of academia, the ability to internalise and express patterns of concepts, but also the related names. Therewith we surround ourselves with echoes that create intensities in our texts, and communication as with ghosts of Christmases past. You probably sense them here, too, even those not explicitly mentioned. Rereading myself, I spot favourite ghosts like McLuhan, Dickens, Shakespeare, Weick and DiMaggio and Powell – all men, sorry to say, but they have my love. And one might ask: are we not all pursuing affective paths towards becoming echoes ourselves? Deleuze, Deleuze, Deleuze, Deleuze ...

While we do this, we invite others to use us in their attempts to capitalise on our theorising, as assets in the public domain, assets that we happily supply. Each quote and reference raises the intensity, but is also a nail in our own personal coffin, labelled 'academicity', stagnation, conformity. Adjusting the perspective, each time we reference or cite another, we grant space and influence to the ghosts that surround us. Still, we must do so to connect with a collective stream of thought, peers living and dead whom we can make contact with, an important part of the training to be real, true and trustworthy academics. To do any less than what we understand is expected risks jeopardising that connection, and we must fine-tune our senses to perceive when we are out of line, and shape up. If we do not, we no longer appear as peers, and thus lose currency in the academic marketplace. This is a most frightful calamity. Without peers, you have nothing, you are nothing,

and no one sees your embroidered collars, earned rightfully or otherwise. You cannot publish if you do not exist, and no one will be there to carry your coffin. Why can't I just grow up?

Academic training is accordingly more than a life's work, as it affects all aspects of our lives and even afterlives. It permeates our lives and deaths, loves and hates, and for this reason we must adhere to traditions already in place, for who can bear 'the whips and scorns of time' or a deathbed realisation of their own imminent oblivion ... who? So, if we seek the vicious capitalist or manager responsible for this bounded practice of academicity, we better look in the mirror. And if we look very carefully, we will probably see the bars of the iron cage that we ourselves forged, and notice the hammer and the chisel we hold, and hear the echo of the approaching undertaker's footsteps.

Post-vignettes: affective athleticism in the era of COVID-19

6:45 AM: Eating breakfast.

Reading emails.

Trying to orient among the never-ending flow of posts on Teams regarding how to make on-campus courses digital.

Everything is in Swedish ... it might take hours to translate.

I give up.

Accompanying my daughter to school.

Academicity saturates my lifeworlds.

We are overwhelmed by the coronavirus pandemic that is dramatically affecting humanity by foregrounding its multiple vulnerabilities, as well as the fragility of the neoliberal society that academia embodies widely. How is this more-than-ever-messy world affecting academia and its principle of productivity? Acting as an academic in the times of COVID-19 is an embodied process of learning how to deliver educational value despite all, because the capitalist infrastructure of knowledge production works in a continuous cycle, and the customers are waiting. 'I've lived through many disasters. ... Your peers now trying to work as normal are going to burn out fast', says one academic on Twitter. 'I'm not sure what kind of problems might arise ... since the whole world has gone digital', says a manager of mine.

8:15 AM: Answering urgent emails while Outlook reminds me that I have to write: publications are waiting for me.

Why do I persist in setting these annoying reminders? I delegate them the responsibility to discipline my time, that's why. I see the bars of the iron cage that I forged myself.

Social platforms are filling up with stories of academics asked to *athletically* cope with the emergency by reinventing courses (but quality should not be compromised, managers remind them), reprogramming research activities, and, accordingly, rearranging their private life in this period of social distancing, home schooling and 'smart' working. The intensities of academicity are unbearable in my flesh. The outbreak is *intensifying* the management of self-management.

9.17 AM: Finally writing, but ... a student's email drags me back into current events.

These days it's hard to disconnect: how dare I isolate myself while the world goes mad?

What if my students can't conduct their data collection, due to the circumstances?

I send an email to my managers, and spend time reading and replying, reading and replying.

My husband is coming with our 10-month-old son: smiling, changing the diaper, feeding him, smiling.

Back to writing.

Academicity saturates my lifeworlds.

Due to the specific circumstances, performing academicity means being flexible now more than ever. But can't the current demand for flexibility easily become a request for more 'agility' in the long run? Like multiskilled triathletes, academics are called on to carry out multiple tasks, so that the team is competitively nimbly. We should perform our entrepreneurial self to keep delivering the university services today, to celebrate ourselves as heroes tomorrow: that's what a proud manager says. How inflexible will this organisational request, not only to project our own individual and collective body in malleable ways but also to quickly acquire a 'sense of purpose, control, and lightness of touch' (Gillies, 2011: 208) in a messier world, become? For the time being, let's play the game, advises the same academic on Twitter.

11.30 AM: Remote meeting with other managers to discuss if the new PhD student is allowed to move to Sweden due to the international safety measures.

Back to writing.

Time to feed my son.

Having lunch and listening to news.

Anguish. Fatigue.

Should I keep writing?

I see the bars of the iron cage that I forged myself.

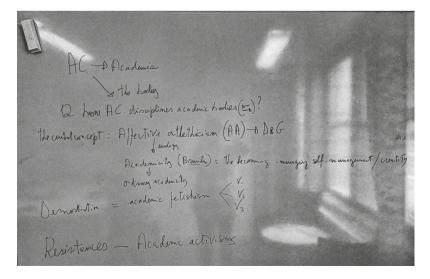
Like a gymnast, I strive to coordinate my whole body to contribute to this collective endeavour. It is a matter of solidarity during global, ecological, posthuman crisis. This emergency is nothing but a demand to change the way we approach the world, work and Others. It is an opportunity to problematise the management practices that inform the process of becoming an academic. Problematisation 'can open up spaces for resistance and, indeed, for counter conduct' (Gillies, 2011: 216). 'In the face of incitement to be nimble and in constant motion, we need to remember the common human need for stability, security, and stasis' (Martin, quoted in Gillies, 2001: 217), being-pausing-thinking rather than endless becoming-performing-delivering.

And now? How can I conclude this chapter?

Here the 'I' is Silvia, a retired professor from the traditional academy, departing in the face of changing academic practices. Mine was also the pen that began this chapter, and was supposed to conclude, according to our original plan, as pictured in the photograph taken by Michela in early May 2019 (see Figure 9.1).

Moreover, the materialisation of our plan on the blackboard of a meeting room in Mälardalen University was preceded by an intense email traffic with this book's editors, intense exchanges regarding possible collaboration with Michela and Magnus, and an exciting time of readings for creating a common ground to write the yet-unwritten.

Figure 9.1: The original writing plan



The whole story began on 18 December 2018, when I received an invitation for a book project on affective capitalism in academia from Daniel Nehring (whom I did not know then). Soon after, I began a conversation about academic capitalism with Michela, Magnus and Daniel. It was only in October 2019 that I met Daniel, and his partner Mengwei, in Shanghai, where we strolled around in the French Concession and had a lovely dinner with their friends, Paolo and Xuhan. By the end of October 2019, Michela, Magnus and I had the plan for the chapter (Figure 9.1) and a tentative first draft, even before the book contract was signed. We completed two further drafts. Two months later, in January, news of COVID-19 made me worried for my new friends in China, and it was hard to believe that they were not allowed outside their homes. How could I imagine that in two months' time, in March 2020, it would be my turn to be confined at home? My journey to Sweden was cancelled, my co-authors Michela and Magnus worked from home, and the Swedish government trusted 'individual social responsibility' in the face of the pandemic. The world is no longer the same.

On 22 March 2020, I received the new draft of the chapter from Michela, and have agonised since then over the writing of the conclusion. I cannot go back to the plan ... it looks so meaningless now, after how the ensuing time's deep impact on our collective writing process. And I am struggling with myself to find an expressive form that transgresses the cannon of academic writing. Now I realise how deeply engrained in my flesh the habit of writing in a linear academic way truly is, when writing my subjectivity in the text ... yes, but with moderation. I love reading about 'writing differently', and did some small experiments of my own in the past, but now I cannot authorise myself to transgress the boundaries of what I learned as the proper way of writing for an academic book. I sense the effect of my 40 years' academic career in my bones, in my fingers.

At this moment, a fire brigade jeep is passing on the small lane of a mountain village, where I am comfortably writing in the open air, and from a megaphone a deep male voice pronounces: "PLEASE NOTE that for health and safety reasons it is mandatory to stay at home in compliance with the instructions received ... I REPEAT".

Can this text ignore what is happening in its con-text? But such deliberate ignorance is one of the writing rules that we obey to when we learn academicity! Maybe affective athleticism is all about this: the way one learns to authorise a subjectivity inscribed in a text that de-territorialises its author from the historical, moral, political and affective con-text, and reterritorialises her/him as the writer in an 'appropriate' academic site. And there is one more thing: it is not all about writing, since writing is entangled with the 'appropriate' affect. The difficulty that I now face is that I am no longer the same author (Silvia) who wrote the above introduction. This text so long in production affected my subjectivity, and my subsequent writing is

affected by the process. I did not expect to become multiple authors within the same text. Should another co-author be added? A Silvia Gherardi 1, together with Silvia Gherardi 2? This is the definition of schizophrenia, and, quoting Félix Guattari's (1995) schyzoanalysis, will not help!

I have to (I want to!) accept the complexity of my own feelings, and accept Michela's invitation to being-pausing-thinking. When I think of the writing process, and of the forces that affected the developing text, I identify the 'being' with Magnus, in the way that he more or less intentionally dove into the writing, and returned changed to its surface. The 'pausing' is the incredible circumstance that made this text agentic and affecting. Pausing is a luxury in academic life, since the rules of the game, and the affective athleticism required to play, create an obstacle course, where one deadline is followed by a second, and so on. And the 'thinking' is what I like most!

While writing, I come to realise that the part of a text called the 'conclusion' acts as a way of looking backwards. It reminds me of a story by Karen Blixen, entitled 'The Stork' and published in *Out of Africa* (2015 [1937]). The story goes like this.

One night a man, who lived by a dammed pond full of fish, was awakened by a terrible noise, and set out in the dark to find the cause. He headed north and then south, but in the darkness, running up and down, back and forth, guided only by the noise, he repeatedly stumbled and fell. At last, he found a leak in the dam, where water and fishes were escaping. He set to work plugging the leak and only when he finished went back to bed. The next morning, looking out of the window, he saw with surprise that his footprints had traced the figure of a stork on the ground. At this point Blixen asks herself: 'When the design of my life is complete, will I see, or will others see a stork?'

The narrator accompanies the story with a design on the sand, and the magic of the fable is that the man who lived by the pond concentrates an entire life in one night, and is able to see it the next morning. Blixen comments that the narrator is the only one who sees the design formed by his steps, since the man of the pond is too busy in what he is doing: life is lived forward and understood backwards.

Adriana Cavarero (2014: 3), commenting on Blixen's story, writes that fiction – unlike philosophy – 'reveals the meaning without committing the error of defining it ... it reveals the finite in its fragile uniqueness, and sings its glory'. In looking back at our experience writing this chapter, I act as the narrator of the stork's story, except that rather than a stork on the sand, I point to the footprints we left on the paper, and refrain from defining them. Rather, the meaning of our story is hidden in the process, how we started with the concept of affective athleticism, how this concept affected

us as authors, and how we left behind the assumption of treating it in the 'usual' rational way, and slowly the concept 'illustrated' itself, becoming performative. The text made us as authors since, like the man in Blixen's story, only in hindsight do I/we see what we did. Being unintentional and beyond our full awareness, what we did is what Alecia Youngblood Jackson and Lisa Mazzei (2012) call 'thinking with theory'. With this term, the authors invite creation of a language and a way of thinking that is at once methodological and philosophical, plugging theory and data into one another, as in the conceptual play of Deleuzian zig-zag. They state that plugging in to produce something new is a constant, continuous process of making and unmaking, since certain connections only emerge *in-between* theory and data and – we may add – in *becoming with one another*.

Who is talking now, then? Is Michela or Magnus or Silvia, or a collective author that has emerged from the performative writing?

In thinking with theory together, we have explored practices of academic capitalism. This text illustrates how the process of academic athleticism has become inscribed in our flesh. Starting from embodied experiences of academic capitalism has allowed us to figure out where it comes from, which are the traces that it has left and what questions can be formulated to interrogate the changes that academia is going through in neoliberal and market-oriented times. Such thinking is incompatible with academic athleticism that asks for constant performing. Here, art comes again in our support to conclude.

Fathia Mohidin³ is an artist living in Sweden who has made the gym a political place for talking about how bodies are shaped, performed and exhibited as machines to be managed with discipline on a regular base. In a recent interview, released on the occasion of the exhibition 'The Poetics of Pressure and Flow' (Västerås Konstmuseum, 2022), she was asked about her concept of the gym as a political place. She responded:

There are many ideas about how we're supposed to be, how we're supposed to look and move. ... The more we build up our bodies and endure our own wellbeing, the more we can achieve – in accordance with principles of a capitalist growth system. ... I've thought a lot about objects in relation to the body. What am I supposed to do with these objects, what are they supposed to do to me?

These words resonate with how we have used the concept of academic 'affective athleticism' to describe what is required in academia to become a 'fit body', a body that fits into the academic capitalism. Rephrasing Mohidin's words, we may ask 'What are we supposed to do in academia and what do these expectations do to me, to us?'

Responding to such questions requires us to cool down our academic musculature.

Hence, let's take a breath and pause!

Notes

- ¹ Universitets- och studenthistoriska sällskapet: www.studenthistoriska.se
- ² Annika Karp: http://annikakarp.se
- ³ Fathia Mohidin: www.fathiamohidin.com

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