

# ***Writing Time: A Rhythmic Analysis of Contemporary Academic Writing***

Saturday 26 October 2019

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*This paper has already been published in [Higher Education Research & Development](#), Volume 38, 2018 - Issue 1: New Perspectives on Reading and Writing Across the Disciplines, p. 185-197. We thank the authors for the permission to republish it here.*

**Abstract:** Where and when do academics write and what are the feelings associated with it? Is the pressure to write a fulfilling process of joyful exploration, or is it stressful and wracked with self-doubt? Inspired by Henri Lefebvre's Rhythmanalysis, this article explores the rhythmic dispositions and orientations of contemporary academic writing, exposing the perils of neoliberal quantification and fragmentation in relation to the practice and experience of writing. The critical examination of Helen Sword's guide to successful academic writing and a critique of the material and abstract spaces destined to contemporary academic writing inform the analysis, revealing problematic contractions and ruptures in the spatio-temporal continuum that organically connects reading, thinking and writing. The article makes therefore a case for the use of Rhythmanalysis as a diagnostic method capable of signalling - by detecting arrhythmias - the increasing disjunction between the institutional demands of accelerated production and the slower, irrational rhythms of craftsmanship. By politicising the pathologies of contemporary academic writing, Rhythmanalysis discloses its potential as a progressive political resource: both as a radical call for appropriation and as a counter-discourse, it allows to restore a more harmonious relationship between thinking, reading and writing against dominant forms of productivist fragmentation, while shedding light on the non-places and dead times of our everyday writing habits.

**Keywords:** academic writing, neoliberalism, rhythmanalysis, everyday life

# 1. Introduction

What proves the wonderful singularity of the writer, is that during the holiday in question, which he takes alongside factory workers and shop assistants, he unlike them does not stop, if not actually working, at least producing. So that he is a false worker, and a false holiday-maker as well. One is writing his memoirs, another is correcting proofs, yet another is preparing his next book. And he who does nothing confesses it as truly paradoxical behaviour, an avant-garde exploit, which only someone of exceptional independence can afford to flaunt. [...]...To speak more decorously, the writer is the prey of an inner god who speaks at all times, without bothering, tyrant that he is, with the holidays of his medium. Writers are on holiday, but their Muse is awake, and gives birth non-stop. (Roland Barthes, "The Writer on Holiday", *Mythologies*, 1957)

Is the writer this singular, miraculous creature for whom doing nothing is "an avant-garde exploit", prey as she is of an inner god who speaks non-stop, eluding human fatigue and trivial quotidian necessities? Roland Barthes' answer does not linger on sophisticated sarcasm when he caustically asserts that "the good-natured image of the writer on holiday is [therefore] no more than one of these cunning mystifications which the Establishment practises the better to enslave its writers"(Barthes, 1957, p.30).

The image of the ever industrious, relentlessly productive, false holiday-maker masterfully sketched by Barthes in the late 1950s strikes a deep chord of recognition with the stereotype of the contemporary overworked academic, especially in the UK, US and Australia. Missing from that picture are the affective and psychosocial dimensions that accompany the intellectual production of academic writing in the twenty-first century. This is a crucial and timely question to ask, considering that writing for research is one of the quintessential activities that come to constitute and determine one's academic identity, sense of intellectual worth and, in the current climate, job security.

Within increasingly marketised higher education sectors, the volume and quality of publications produced by university departments are, in fact, determinant to secure the steadily diminishing share of public funding destined for research. Through institutional exercises such as the Research Excellence Framework, [1] universities compete with one another in an effort to prove that their scientific production is world leading, innovative and ground-breaking enough to secure a comparative advantage in the national and global arenas of the Knowledge-Based-Economy (Jessop & Sum 2013). When competitiveness and evaluative mechanisms culturally define and structure organisational processes, ethos and individual behaviours, the once-considered creative art of writing, [2] is subordinated and subjected to the neoliberal imperatives of efficiency (output productivity), effectiveness (rate of successful publications), economy (increased output productivity vis-à-vis reduced time). Under pressure to continually publish quality publications while simultaneously handling competing activities – teaching, administrative duties, private lives – academic writing in contemporary universities might as well lose the romantic trait evoked in Barthes' image of the never-dormant Muse, to descend into a much darker place. Here, lack of time and space for writing invariably becomes synonymous with anxiety, toxic shame and guilt (Gill, 2009; Burrows 2012; 2014). In other words, we should not be asking how successful academics write (Sword, 2017), but rather, how they *feel* when they do and – above all – when they don't.

To this end, we begin by unveiling the “cunning mystifications” of the publish-or-perish agenda, weaving academic writing into the fabric of the neoliberal thought collective and exposing the link between quantification/fragmentation of the self, academia and mental health issues. We then examine the claims made by Helen Sword in her guide to successful academic writing (2017) against the eurythmic and arrhythmic dispositions that ease or inhibit the practice of writing in our everyday lives.

Lefebvre’s Rhythmanalysis (2002) is introduced as a philosophical method and as a pedagogical stance that help problematize, disentangling it, the rhythmicity of writing practices in the contemporary academe. Here, accounts of the often fractured spatio-temporal chain between deep reading, thinking and writing both reflect and react to “everyday neoliberalism” (Mirowski, 2013), reclaiming the “Air & Light & Time & Space” (Sword, 2017) that reinvigorate the practice of writing as a “field of play” (Richardson, 1997) rather than as a site of existential struggle. The article concludes with a case for Rhythmanalysis (Lefebvre, 2013), invoked as a diagnostic method and as a holistic approach to the difficulties associated with writing that, with no exception, all academics encounter. The latter, it is argued, can offer a much more promising way to access and restore the organic connection between thinking, reading and writing. Similarly, it purports to contribute to the rescuing of academic writing from the claws of dominant forms of productivist fragmentation, to redefine, philosophically and politically, the relationship between pedagogy, writing and intellectual craftsmanship.

## **2. Open Wounds and Wounded Attachments: Neoliberalism and Academia**

In a famous piece titled “Breaking the silence: The hidden injuries of the neoliberal university”, Rosalind Gill (2009) forcefully exposed the affective embodied experiences of “exhaustion, stress, overload, insomnia, anxiety, shame, aggression, hurt, guilt and feelings of out-of-placeness, fraudulence and fear of exposure within the contemporary academy” (Gill, 2009, p.4). Tellingly, the opening passage quotes verbatim a private conversation between the author and a colleague-friend revolving around not having time to write, think or read, juggling multiple tasks, being overwhelmed by emails, sacrificing family time, dealing with brutal article rejections and working ridiculously long hours. The naïve would perhaps expect this to be the grim portrait of academic life for precarious early career researchers in anonymous post-92 universities. On the contrary, the protagonists are two tenured mature female academics, both working for pre-1992, research intensive, British institutions.

Gill presented an unadulterated behind the scene cross-section of everyday life in English universities, based on those hidden, secret or silenced experiences that can nevertheless be exhumed from emails of colleagues, informal corridor chats, university memos, exchanges with journal editors and other significant oral or written conversations. Collected over the period of a year, they formed a rich data-set and point of departure for debates and analyses that started to explicitly connect these widespread (negative) experiences with macro-organisational/institutional routines and neoliberal practices at play in the Western university. It is therefore essential to embed these individual experiences within broader streams of literature that consider theories of state restructuring at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Jessop, 2015; Cerny, 1997; Bauman, 2000; Beck, 2000) with an emphasis on the transformation of work – e.g. post-Fordism; liquid modernity; network society; knowledge/learning society. Here, recurring themes feature flexibilization of work patterns; individualization; risk and insecurity; competition; rapid technologic change and the ensuing need for constant reskilling and updating of knowledge.

A second, crucial body of literature connects state restructuring with the cultural, political, and economic transformations of (higher) education (Dale, 2001; Dale and Robertson, 2002; Robertson, 2011, 2012; Bonal, 2003), while a subset of this strand pays particular attention to the institutional, organizational and cultural consequences of marketization and neo-technocratic managerialism (Brown and Carasso, 2013; Callinicos 2006; Filippakou, Salter and Tapper, 2012; Foskett, 2011). The latter are often framed as the importing of corporate and managerial governance styles from the private sector; the privatization and commercialization of universities; the recasting and rephrasing of education in instrumental, transactional and utilitarian terms; the transformation of students into consumers and customers; the casualization of the academic workforce so that is no longer a profession, and the degradation of pay and working conditions; the erosion of academic freedom and autonomy; the proliferation of audit and evaluative measures and the pervasiveness of calculative practices.

Finally, psychosocial analyses of neoliberalism inspired by Foucault place emphasis on processes of “compulsory individuality” (Cronin, 2000), whereby “individuals are now increasingly required to tell the story of their lives as if they were the outcome of deliberative planning and choice” (Gill, 2009, p. 6) and on disciplinary technologies of the self that efficaciously create and sustain a relentless self-monitoring, responsibilised neoliberal (academic) subject. Set against this backdrop, Gill’s lucid exposé of precariousness, endemic burnout, intensification (acceleration) and “extensification” (Gill, 2009, p. 9) of academic work across time and space, sketches a painfully accurate portrait of the internalized psychic dispositions of the neoliberal academic subject. Here, anxiety, guilt and shame, fuelled by sector-wide, fetishized competition, have arguably come to signify the “structures of feeling” (Williams, 1977) of the contemporary Academe. Their generative and reproductive *dispositifs* are located precisely in those individualistic discourses that privatize rather than collectively share and denounce those negative feelings and experiences. When it comes to academic writing, the latter are elicited in the case of slow-paced and/or low productivity and, acutely, in the case of scathing reviews and rejections. In other words, the joys and pleasures of writing seem to be confined to a special breed of academics capable of unyielding self-discipline, resilience, adaptation, rapid response and, above all, of high-volume and high-quality productivity. Within this psychic environment, the passionate attachment to the creative process that is integral to academic writing risks faltering under the cruel necessities of “quantified control” (Burrows, 2012). However, paradoxically, the struggling academic seems to be caught in a relation of “cruel optimism” (Berlant, 2011), whereby their attachment to prohibitive conditions of possibility – hyper productivity across the board – reproduces a vicious cycle of hopeful anticipation without delivery. Yet the failure to deliver intensifies the “wounded attachment” (Brown, 1993) to the object of desire, adding to the hidden injuries of neoliberalism.

As a result, for increasing numbers of academics and students academia has become a site of mental health issues. In recent years, many have spoken out from a range of platforms including blogs, online newspapers and social media platforms, breaking a silence induced by shame and isolation as they confessed to anxiety, depression, chronic insomnia, burnout and neurosis. [3] This has helped ignite fruitful theoretical encounters between social theories of acceleration, philosophies of time and rhythm and the attendant psychosocial dimensions of academic labour (Vostal, 2016; Wozniak, 2017; Cannizzo, 2018; Rosa, 2017; Bennett and Burke, 2017). Particularly useful in providing a critical context for the following analysis is Fabian Cannizzo’s tactical evaluation of everyday life neoliberalism (Cannizzo, 2018). The author emphasizes the metamorphosis of economic techniques into “quasi-sovereign”, “ritualized and rhetorically powerful” forms of authority (ibid. p. 25) to reveal how the neoliberal political agenda operates at the level of norms and discourses, producing and validating certain interpretations and enactments of the everyday events that Philip Mirowski (2013)

terms “everyday neoliberalism”. Through an exploration of the practices, attitudes and horizons of action that inform – often subconsciously – our everyday lives, it becomes possible to better comprehend the critical theoretical juncture between state governance and individual self-governing habitus. Crucially, this form of compulsory individuality cannot be achieved without fragmenting one’s selfhood:

The fragmentation of the neoliberal self begins when the agent is brought face to face with the realization that she is not just an employee or student, but also simultaneously a product to be sold, a walking advertisement, a manager of her résumé, a biographer of her rationales, and an entrepreneur of her possibilities. She has to somehow manage to be simultaneously subject, object, and spectator. She is perforce *not* learning about who she really is, but rather, provisionally buying the person she must soon become. (Mirowski, 2013, p. 108)

Mirowski’s analysis of the fragmented self is fundamental to anchor the following discussion on academic writing for publication. When the philosophical unity of the subject is lost to increasingly utilitarian forms of pre-packaged, strategically saleable selfies, psychic breakdowns reveal the questioning of one’s existential authenticity. These ruptures in the healthy flow of human rhythms can also be read as the *locus resistantiae* to this fragmentation, in a cry to re-establish the severed link between subject and reality. Significantly, a parallel can be drawn between the conditions of psychopathology and arrhythmia. In both Psychoanalysis and Rhythmanalysis, in fact, detecting and evidencing the disorders produced by the breaking apart of our psyche is central to the reconstitution of its relational ontology. What, then, are the consequences for the creative process of writing, which undoubtedly subsumes the far bigger questions of thinking and being?

This leads us to a first exploration of contemporary academic writing, creativity and identity, as we find them portrayed in Helen Sword’s guide on successful academic writing, here considered as representative of this genre.

### **3. Air & Light & Time & Space: Writing in Contemporary Academia**

Helen Sword’s book on successful academic writing (2017) proffers a comprehensive yet non-prescriptive, realistic yet motivational, flexible yet disciplining guide for writers who want it all: increasing rates of productivity, refined craftsmanship and sheer pleasure, all of which finds its poetic synthesis in the “Air & Light & Time & Space” to write.

Swiftly the scholar distances herself from the provocative opening entrusted to Charles Bukowski: for the poet, in fact, “air and light and time and space/have nothing to do with it”, because “if you are going to create/you’re going to create... you are going to create blind/crippled/demented”, “even with a cat crawling up your/back while/the whole city trembles in earthquake, bombardment,/flood and fire”. [4] Bukowski’s possessed writer and Barthes’ never-dormant Muse crystallize the myth of that suspended zone of intellectual or artistic retreat that typically culminates in an intense, nearly transcendent creative outpouring. Yet the time, spaces and atmospheres surrounding our intellectual production leave a rich reservoir of material and affective traces in our writing, determining its quality and conditioning our experience of it, for better or worse. That is why Sword turns her scholarly gaze away from the aesthetic of academic prose to the lived experience of



(exemplary) writers. Far from challenging the imperatives of publish or perish, the author provides a guide for surviving them, along with an array of tricks designed to help thrive in them. She takes as an example – and beacon of hope – the impressive academic records of roughly a hundred prolific writers scattered around the globe. Notwithstanding well-crafted attempts to argue in favour of more holistic, tailor-made strategies to overcome writer's blocks or carve out fragments of quiet time-space within which to produce, the reader-writer can hardly forget the damning mirage of the 'Grafton line', named after a famous historian who is known to write 3,500 words every morning. Even less can they resist the temptation of measuring their own performance against that of the successful academics interviewed by Sword. The relationship with one's writing habits and outcomes is presented as idiosyncratic and connected with personality traits rather than with feelings of pain and elation that do not necessarily match the binary of the struggling and the successful writer. That is why, argues Sword, air, light, time and space have everything to do with writing. The emphasis, though, is placed firmly on of *how much* we write and on attendant techniques to ease the conditions of production. In Sword's "House of Writing", the psychic and affective dimensions of academic writing are neither unpacked nor problematized. Though we certainly find a useful guide that explains how to compartmentalize, project-manage, and surveil sealed aspects of what Charles Wright Mills called "intellectual craftsmanship" (Mills, 1959). Put it differently, Sword's "BASE" (Sword, 2017, p. 4) treats the behavioural, artisanal, social and emotional habits of writing as discrete outputs that can and should be maximized in order to enlarge the foundation of the house. Indeed, the diagnostic exercise the reader is invited to complete at the beginning of the book provides an instant visual assessment of the geometry of our writing defects *and* a tactical solution in sync with Mirowski's depiction of everyday neoliberalism. Time, space, rhythms, rituals and emotions associated with writing are surgically explored by means of a strictly utilitarian code: whether you write in the dead of night or at the crack of dawn to circumvent family duties; use various time-management techniques to prod you into production; [5] attend writing retreats; find motivation-through-punishment as per the dictats of Write or Die, your writing will be a mark of personal and professional success. You could even reach grotesque new heights by replicating Robert Boice's sadistic experiment, where he persuaded a group of unproductive colleagues to sign personal cheques to a despised political organization with the pending threat of mailing those cheques should they fail to meet their weekly writing goals (Sword, 2017, p. 52). So long as it works. The author is cognizant of the rhetorical and substantive discrepancy that pits the organic, cyclical flows of intellectual craftsmanship against the ruthless necessities of the contemporary, accelerated rhythms of production. The solution offered promises to narrow the gap by effecting what Lefebvre warns against as a "nefarious pedagogic illusion":

This illusion is twofold: on the one hand, a *fetishism of the partial*, and thus of the fragmentary and the specialized, an acceptance of fragmentation and the *dismissal of totality*; on the other hand, a fetishism of the total, an equalizing of differences. [...] There is a middle way between the dismissal of totality and the fetishism of the partial, and critique of the everyday life can help to define it. (Lefebvre, 2002, p. 68) (emphasis added).

When we look at the practice and experience of writing through the optic of rhythm, the limits of similar guidelines or of social media *querelles* on whether reading, thinking and note-taking are to be considered an integral part of writing or rather discarded as procrastination, [6] become apparent.

We will now delve deeper into the maze and mystique of contemporary academic writing, revisiting

doctoral students' experiences and approaches to writing as rhythmic occurrences. This will offer an opportunity to address disaffecting practices that often surround academic work in a bid to move writing from generation against outputs to creation through inputs, while showcasing the potential of Rhythmanalysis as a method capable of revealing the impossible disjunctions between rhythms of thinking, writing and, ultimately, being.

## 4. Writing Rhythms, Rhythms of Writing

At one of the first meetings as a doctoral candidate, the student will arrive with a chart where the writing-up period is conceived in space as a long blue bar positioned at the end of the research process and as a time that swallows up to a third – and often more – of the time allotted. For the student it is at once esoteric and abstract. The thesis cannot happen without research, but writing up suggests an exit velocity, a defined and definite point in time when the student will either acquire or possess disciplinary expertise. In turn it suggests a crescendo, a final flourish, but also a communion, when the product, the thesis, confers a title and acceptance into a community of like-minded people. Yet this is so often not the case. For students, but for many academics as well, (Hayot, 2014a), writing, and writing up, exist as a site of apprehension, a point in time and space respectively, of becoming stuck. That this is inscribed at the beginning of the research project means that it hangs over the writer like a final summit. This is the challenge with focusing on writing as a discrete output, as a task to be managed by the software of the mind towards the hardware of scholarly and institutional evaluation. It is therefore essential we “begin by recognizing that academic writing is not just a set of words on the page, but it is a *procedure*” (Hayot, 2014b); it is, *a method of inquiry* (Richardson, 1997) rather than an end in itself. In this respect we argue that Rhythmanalysis and, more broadly, an educational reading of Lefebvre’s philosophical teachings, have a lot to offer. Published posthumously (1992) as the fourth and final chapter of the *Critique of Everyday Life*, the rhythmanalytical project is concerned with researching the production of human nature, to liberate it from the cages of technocratic reason, capitalistic exploitation and oppressive control. Rhythmanalysis is essentially conceived as a transformative method, as an emancipatory philosophy of life and as political *credo*. Its Marxist and Heideggerian foundations reverberate throughout his oeuvre, where notions of everyday, alienation, appropriation and dwelling recur with rhythmic cadence. To become total persons, according to Lefebvre, we must avoid the “fetishism of the partial” and re-appropriate the time-spaces of our own existence. The critique of the everyday is therefore framed dialectically as a method, a practice and a site where transformation is on the horizon. The shift from latency to action is however contingent on the seizing of critical moments, to be enacted and lived as attempts to achieve the total realization of a possibility.

In the first place, then, a Rhythmanalysis of academic writing can help us locate and diagnose arrhythmias in the process of intellectual production by forcing us to confront and interrogate the origin of the pathology, rather than find ways to live with it. The daunting blue line that represents the conceived space of writing up, the emphasis on the final product and the obliteration of the existential conditions of its making echo the neoliberal fragmentation of the self and the loss of enjoyment in the genesis of meaning that are central to (academic) writing. By reducing writing to output, one effaces the multitude and variety of rhythmic undulations that establish the historic provenance, present conditions and future orientations of one’s intellectual efforts, producing the fetishism of the total that equalizes all the differences. How can we recover an organic conjuncture of thinking, being and writing then, one that subsume and sublimate moments of crisis (e.g. writer’s blocks), stasis and recovery, harnessing the energy -rhythm- that renders time and space alive? The following section will discuss material and metaphorical spaces of writing, in parallel with a political and educational reading of Rhythmanalysis, viewed as a form of re-appropriation of the mental and physical time-spaces we inhabit and produce as writers.

## **5. Everyday Battlefields and Non-Places: Becoming Writers**

As an advocate of writing in the postmodern epoch, marked by language games and technologies which encourage play with words and concepts (Lyotard, 1984), it is not surprising that Richardson (1997) isolates play as a procedure through which writing can be undertaken. Key to this, and following from the title of her book, *Fields of Play*, is the position of play as writing within, in and around fields. Drawing on Bourdieu, a scholar both of fields of knowledge (2010) and of play and games (1993), Richardson sees that fields are the site and sight of writing, to the point where these fields become more about plying academic battles in the boardroom, than playing creatively with words. These are not fields of expansiveness, or of introspection, but of constriction, even contrition, where excuses are made for the trajectory of work, for undertaking writing as a procedure.

While modern architectural innovations such as social learning spaces may suit twenty-first-century students, batteries of open plan offices, marked and sold by their relationship to spaces of “air and light”, mean that the fields of the modern University become closer to a synopticon, where the few (staff) are surveilled by the many (students, management) (Mathiesen, 1997). Consistent with Sword’s account, more than a few early career and seasoned academics who have respectively attended writing classes and retreats in our Professional Doctorate programme [7], for instance, reported that they are unable to write while they are physically located at work as the expectation of availability is simply too evident. Interestingly, for advocates of air and light, open plan offices are described as transparent. In common with cultures of surveillance, these are fields where play, both as a battle and as a game cannot occur, as access through and within these spaces, as Richardson explains, is too smooth. Writing is indeed a procedure that needs to be grasped, wrestled with, pitched, thrown around. Even in the abstract, the procedure of writing remains intense, surrounded by verbs of battle, of fields to be explored, exhausted, pushed against, overcome, even defeated. In these spaces then, the act of writing may not have changed, but the fields of play, the spaces themselves, have altered. As a space that is at once material and abstract, the English higher education sector can be read as a race between individuals, faculties, institutions and units of assessment to occupy the conceived spaces and grades of the Research Excellence Framework (REF) and, more recently, the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). These mimic the fields of competition illustrated earlier on: grade point averages, top ten, top spot, bronze, silver and gold awards. The quantification of these in terms of league tables, scores and grades, is a sign of the “academy sobering up [a] 12 step programme: one day at a time, one funding bid at a time” (Highmore, 2017, p.242). However, in spite of the challenges of surveillance and competition, the assimilation, creation and dissemination of knowledge still appears as the prime aim of the university and the academic.

As for the doctoral student, writing for early career and mature academics suggests a special time-space to be set apart from the everyday. For some, inured to the rhythms of the strip-lit corridors of the institution, this occurs in the early hours of the day, say between 4.00am and 6.00am, before work and the world interfere. For others, writing happens between 10.00pm and 2.00am. The location is in those everyday spaces that are nominally reserved for other things, that are themselves part of linear and circular, repetitive and reassuring rhythms: eating at the dining room table, food preparation in the kitchen, responding to communication at the desk in the hallway.

However, writing time is located in the everyday, even when it is barely sutured to its edges. Its position and process, content and procedure show writing to be nonetheless the rhythmic conjuncture that Highmore, referring to Althusser and Balibar, describes as a meeting point



between time and history, realized in space (2018, p. 253).

It is orientated towards the future, written for another set of eyes to ponder, critique and attach meaning to. Extrapolated to consideration around the space and time of writing, this is the Augenblick, “where future and past collide in the present, as the temporality of the moment” (Elden, 2005, p. 49): in the blink of an eye something is created. This is a continuing theme through writing and method from philosophy through sociology to cultural studies: for Lefebvre it is the rhythm, for Simmel the snapshot, a fleeting image, for Barthes short mythologies, for Baudrillard the theory-fiction essay complemented by photography. That these are experiences common to all, shows the possibilities that are evident in all writing: that the true revolutions happen at a point in time where the everyday is inscribed and described.

Given the complexities surrounding writing, the bodily rhythms and habits that must be turned upside down to achieve it, the sheer force of will that is required to capture the conjuncture in everyday life, the procedure becomes a creative act brought together, documented on the page. It is the Lefebvrian constellation of moments that documents the seizing of those spaces as sites of resistance in the fields of play that surround, enable, confirm and confine our writing time.

The conjuncture of space and time in capitalist culture generally and in the university specifically, suggests that there is not enough time to create and to write, with academics increasingly appropriating the gaps and rough spaces that exist in the everyday, where moments, snapshots, mythologies and theory-fictions harmonize with linear rhythms.

That these spaces are not always to be found in the ivory towers of old is instructive. These are the rough gaps and jagged crevices in the smooth space of capital. They are the point our doctoral students must confront before the vertical ascension of ‘writing up’ appears to them. These are places where writers identify and isolate their craft, in their conjuncture with non-places and dead-times. These are times early in the day when the city is silent, or on trains, where their crowded quiet take on the form of a modern, mobile library for study, reflection and writing. Our writers write time into the everyday, effectively producing the field of play and competition where the writing has taken place, and their position in relation to it. Yet the political and emancipatory aspirations of the rhythm-analytical project suggest that we occupy, expand and ultimately *become* those cracks and interstices of resistance to everyday fragmentation. This means actively subverting and disorientating the imperatives of such conceived, dominated spaces (e.g. transparent, surveilled spaces, shared offices, deadlines, appraisals and so forth) to seek “a revived unity and totality of the experiential, the philosophical and the political” (Lefebvre, 2006, p. 17). That is why embracing the rhythms of writing in their totality implies a call for action that detonate dominated time-spaces and re-configure educational spaces as lived and perceived by those who infuse them with imagination and feeling, so that writing itself become a form of poetic dwelling.

## **6. Conclusions: Rhythm, Critique and Intellectual Craftsmanship**

Thus one comes to conceive of writing as an interruptive becoming; the moving interval that perhaps designates itself on the basis of interdiction, but by opening the latter to discover in it

not the Law, but the *speaking-between* [*l'entre-dire*], *inter-diction* or the vacancy of discontinuity. (Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 1969)

In *The Infinite Conversation*, literary critic Maurice Blanchot describes writing as “the immediate seizing of a presence” (Blanchot, 1969, p.261) that involves a break with thought, wherein thought surrenders itself as an immediate proximity at the same time as it is a break with any empirical experience we have of the world. The activity of writing reveals in fact a moment of suspension with any state of present consciousness, being engaged as it is in the experience of the unknown or the non-manifest.

This interruptive becoming that opens itself up to the infinite possibilities of *l'entre dire* at once embodies, represents and perpetuates the rhythmicity of writing. More than that, it reiterates the impossibility of conceiving writing without the constituent elements of thinking, reading and being, the simultaneity and circularity of which echo the ineffable return of rhythm. *Rhythmos* does not just manifest itself as flow and form, as observed by Emile Benveniste (1971), but has the unique ability to “double-cross” itself, “the earthly and ethereal, enforcing the work of labour as much as the play of pleasure” (Henriques et al., 2014). With both traumatic and therapeutic implications, *rhythmos* can be employed to detect hidden links and synthesize moments occurring at different temporal conjunctions, delivering a presence that carries within itself a past that could be recreated in a future synopsis and – moving backwards – a future capable of delivering its past to it.

This paper has argued that academic writing should not be seen as a sequence of discrete, disjointed activities to be individually micro-managed and optimized for productivity gains under severe time constraints. It has suggested instead that writing might be a rhythmic occurrence enmeshed in the everyday, *as a time written into everyday life*. Far from counting merely as output, as affective accounts of writing debacles or triumphs attest, writers identify their practice with process, procedure and content. From the rhythmic constellation of activities that include thinking, exchanging views, reading, taking notes, drafting and redrafting, writing emerges as a conjuncture.

The first part of this paper has emphasized the seamless connection between experiences of writing in contemporary academia and the fragmentation of the self that is required to maximize life chances for a subject operating in a neoliberal environment. The price to pay is an endemic state of arrhythmia born out of a fundamentally temporal mismatch:

Craft work grinds against the gears of capital. Both the production of monetary value and status are governed by accelerating rhythms: research writing and grant applications are subject to anticipatory acceleration, as key conduits of status and finance in academia.

There is a temporal logic at play here. [...] The clash between craft and commerce is temporal: craft work is premised on temporal irrationality precisely because it is personal. Academic craft work consumes time without promise of profit. This is the time it takes to read, to think, to experiment, to communicate. (Cannizzo, *The Sociological Review Blog*, 2018)

The diffuse anxiety registered among academics when it comes to writing contrasts with the relaxed

condition that C. Wright Mills once described as essential for the flourishing of the sociological imagination. However, a rhythmic analysis of academic writing does not just serve the purpose of detecting pathological arrhythmias. By politicising arrhythmias, the symptom of a disorder can become its own pharmakon.

For Lefebvre it is possible to think of a pedagogy of space-time as a form of counter-space capable of revealing the breaking point of certain everyday practices and, most importantly, of signalling 'the ways in which that counter-space can be appropriated as exuberant, revolutionary, full of enjoyment and hope' (Neary & Amsler, 2008, p. 107)

Wozniak (2017) for example uses Rhythmanalysis to examine what he calls debt dressage: he looks at the temporality of debt as a form of disciplining apparatus that trains indebted subjects by colonizing their existential time. Yet the double-sided nature of rhythm discloses its potential to operate as a progressive political weapon: rhythm is both produced and productive; rhythm returns without opposing itself to becoming. If we think of dressage (training) as a pedagogy of domination where the craft-time of writing increasingly struggles to keep up with the anticipatory acceleration of dominant time-economies, we won't escape a condition of permanent contrition.

However, education, unlike technical training, 'holds the promise and possibility of invention and cannot be reduced to mechanical linear rhythms' (Wozniak, 2017, p. 503). Indeed, it can disrupt (debt) dressage by suspending it, thus freeing time. The recognition that 'resistance to hegemonic rhythms is composed of, and produces, counter-rhythms' and that 'resistance itself is often an arrhythmic intervention that causes ruptures in normalized rhythmic flows of power' (Wozniak, 2017, p. 504)

Rhythmanalysis allows us to reimagine the spatio-temporality of writing (and education) as an emancipatory practice: the time-space of writing can be produced anew through a suspension of the dominant time economy. Finally liberated, air and light, time and space can coalesce in the production of what Jan Masschlein, echoing Giorgio Agamben, calls "profane" time (Masschlein, 2011), a condition in which time, space and activities such as writing, disconnected from their regular uses and conventions, become truly open for common use. Suspended, un-finished and appropriated like the interruptive becoming of an infinite conversation, this writing begs the question: what would happen if we turned the writing malaise that afflicts many academics from a site of apprehension into a site of resistance?

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## Footnotes

[1] For a detailed description of how the assessment of research works in England, see <http://www.ref.ac.uk>

[2] Similarly to writing for research, teaching is increasingly subjected to competitive 'metricization': the Teaching Excellence Framework links excellence in teaching (measured by key performance indicators) to the possibility of charging differential fees, following classification as 'Gold, Silver or Bronze' – thus paving the way for further institutional stratification. See <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/lt/tef/>.

[3] See, for instance:  
<https://www.theguardian.com/education/series/mental-health-a-university-crisis>;  
[https://www.theguardian.com/education/2018/jun/28/student-mental-health-must-be-top-priority-universities-minister?CMP=Share\\_iOSApp\\_Other](https://www.theguardian.com/education/2018/jun/28/student-mental-health-must-be-top-priority-universities-minister?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other)

[4] See Charles Bukowski's poem 'air and light and time and space' :  
<https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/air-and-light-and-time-and-space/>

[5] For example, see the Pomodoro Technique: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pomodoro\\_Technique](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pomodoro_Technique)

[6] See for example: <https://jovanevery.ca/real-writing-procrastination/>

[7] Professional Doctorate programme run by the authors at a post-92 British university.