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EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

Slow Criticism

Responsibilities of reading *well*

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This issue of borderlands showcases what I propose to call 'slow criticism'. Slow criticism is a criticism that takes the time to interrogate the scholarly orthodoxies that invariably seem to establish themselves in any given field of inquiry. As such, slow criticism fulfils an important corrective function in today's academic environment. What is at stake in the production of slow criticism is nothing less than our ability to stay attuned to the ethical and political demands made on us as critics at a time when we are ever-more insidiously, and therefore powerfully, interpellated into the role of compliant scholarly citizen ready to feed the well-oiled machine of what is now so glibly called our 'knowledge economy'. If borderlands has always offered a home to a politically and ethically invested criticism that is situated in the interstices of disciplines and that, from the space (or non-space) of these interstices, is able to interrogate prevailing disciplinary assumptions, the five contributions gathered together for this issue bring much-needed critical scrutiny to a strikingly diverse set of disciplines and debates. They approach these disciplines and debates with the kind of dual responsibility that J. Hillis Miller associates with an 'ethics of reading'. That is, the authors read their respective texts responsibly—slowly, carefully—while never losing sight of their simultaneous responsibility to 'the social, institutional, political realms'.

Philology is that venerable art which demands of its votaries one thing above all: to go aside, to take time, to become still, to become slow [...]—this art does not so easily get anything done, it teaches to read well, that is to say, to read slowly, deeply, looking cautiously before and aft, with reservations, with doors left open, with delicate eyes and fingers...

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak* (1881)

This issue of *borderlands* appears with a few days' delay: I took my time over re-reading all contributions carefully, reflecting on what may be most critically at stake in them (both individually and collectively), and finally gathering my thoughts for this brief editorial introduction. Many reasons could be cited to explain my apparent tardiness. Some are personal: I could admit, for example, somewhat sheepishly, to possessing finely honed procrastination skills, or I could cite, vaguely, the many unexpected challenges life can throw one's way. I could also, and perhaps more convincingly, offer perfectly valid professional reasons, explaining that as scholars working within the constraints of an increasingly corporatised university structure, we all face the challenge of solving an unsolvable equation: how to meet the ever-multiplying demands our institutions make on us to be 'good' (to be translated as 'efficient' or 'productive') writers, teachers, editors, administrators, etc. in the same old timeframe that is available for meeting these growing demands. All-too-frequently, the only solution to this impossible equation seems to be to compromise our own our understanding of what it takes to be a 'good' scholar: the ability and willingness to read widely and thoroughly, to reflect critically on what we have read, and to offer our own carefully considered contributions to the debates into which we are intervening—all of which takes time, the very time that, in today's universities, is so rarely there for the taking.

So when I took my time over putting this issue together I did so not only for the reasons cited above; I also took my time in a deliberate attempt to *take back time*: the time it takes to read, think and write—to produce what I propose to call 'slow criticism'.¹ A turn towards the slow is of course not new, and my advocacy for a slow criticism may well look like a fad appearing on the coattails of other aspects of the slow movement: slow living, slow cooking etc. However, rather than a mere fad—with the all the connotations of superficiality and triviality that go with that term—slow criticism, I propose, fulfils an important corrective function in today's academic environment. What is at stake in the production of slow criticism, I believe, is nothing less than our ability to stay attuned to the ethical and political demands made on us as critics at a time when we are ever-more insidiously, and therefore powerfully, interpellated into the role of compliant scholarly citizen ready to feed the well-oiled machine of what is now so glibly called our 'knowledge economy'—both directly (through our own research 'outputs') and indirectly (through the 'useful' or 'relevant' bits of information we teach our students). Whether it is in the way we put together our research grant applications for external funding bodies or

in the way we deliver our power point presentations in the lecture theatre, what is generally required of us in today's academy is the production of fast and easily digestible information: sound-bites of knowledge. Slow criticism, by contrast, resists such a consumerist stance vis-à-vis knowledge; itself a result of hard reading, thinking and writing, it offers food for thought that may well cause momentary mental indigestion—in fact, I hope that it will.

Slow criticism necessarily begins with slow reading, as a form of ethical reading which stipulates, as Lori Branch West puts it, 'a value of reading outside the economic-epistemological configuration of 'getting something out of the text', in which 'knowledge' is extracted from a text and 'meaning' is the exchange value of that knowledge' (Branch West 1999, p. 187). Slow reading is a close, attentive way of approaching a text. It is a way of reading *well*, in the way that Nietzsche, in the epigraph I have chosen for this issue, proposes philology 'teaches to read *well*' (Nietzsche 1997, p. 5). With the first explicit mention going as far back as Nietzsche, slow reading is clearly not a recent phenomenon. Rather than a mere side-kick of the latest 'slow' craze, then, slow reading has a well-established intellectual history,² sharing characteristics with, for example, the 'close reading' practice promoted by New Criticism in English departments but also, and importantly, pushing beyond New Criticism's somewhat clinical approach to a text—to a space where, as J. Hillis Miller quips, 'strange things happen'. Recounting his own 'movement from American New Criticism to the rhetorical criticism' he came to practice, Miller entertains us with the following vignette:

I just did what the New Critics told me to do: 'Read closely. Ask questions of the text. Ask why is this or that feature there. What is its function? What does it do? Do not say anything about a text that cannot be supported by the words on the page.' Strange things happen, as I discovered, when you do that conscientiously and with as open a mind as possible. (Miller 2009, p. 178)

Ultimately, what is at stake in Miller's hyperbolic—deconstructive—reinvention of New Criticism is the reintroduction of criticism's ethical and political responsibilities. Reading, he insists in his earlier *The Ethics of Reading* (1987), has a dual responsibility: a responsibility not just to the text (such as it is demanded by New Criticism) but also to the world of action:

The ethical moment in the act of reading ... if there is one, faces in two directions. On the one hand it is a response to something, responsible to it, responsive to it, respectful of it. In any ethical moment there is an imperative, some 'I must' or *Ich kann nicht anders*. I *must* do this. I cannot do otherwise. If the response is not one of necessity, grounded in some 'must,' if it is a freedom to do what one likes, for example to make a literary text mean what one likes, then it is not ethical, as when we say, 'That isn't ethical.' On the other hand, the ethical moment in reading leads to an act. It enters into the social, institutional, political realms, for example in

what the teacher says to the class or in what the critic writes. (Miller 1987, p. 4)

Responsible reading is therefore simultaneously responsible *to* (the text) and responsible *for* (the effects one's reading generates in the world); or, as Miller puts it, it is a form of reading that is simultaneously 'necessitated' and 'free' (with all the existential burden of responsibility that goes with such freedom):

By 'the ethics of reading' ... I mean that aspect of the act of reading in which there is a response to the text that is both necessitated, in the sense that it is a response to an irresistible demand, and free, in the sense that I must take responsibility for my response and for the further effects, 'interpersonal,' institutional, social, political, or historical, of my act of reading, for example as that act takes the form of teaching or of published commentary on a given text. What happens when I read *must* happen, but I must acknowledge it as *my* act of reading, though just what the 'I' is or becomes in this transaction is another question. (Miller 1987, p. 43)

This somewhat conflicted and conflicting doubleness of responsibility Miller associates with an 'ethics of reading'—where the critic approaches the otherness of a text both respectfully, without appropriating it or violently assuming ownership over it, and yet simultaneously owns (or owns up to) the reading he or she puts forth and the ethico-political effects this reading may generate—lies at the heart of what I am here calling slow criticism. Slow criticism is a responsible criticism in the sense that it is attentive to the 'irresistible demand' a given text, scholarly discourse or other object of study makes upon the critic: it reads the text *well*, without, however, following it blindly. Attending as much to that which the text says as to that which it cannot or does not (want to) say, slow criticism remains alert to the inherent otherness in any given text. It asks after the ethico-political effects generated by such foreclosures, disavowals, blind spots, inconsistencies, contradictions, paradoxes etc.—an inquiry that is both motivated by *and enacts* ethico-political responsibility.

More specifically, in the context of this issue of *borderlands* (and consistent with the ethos of the journal more generally), slow criticism means a criticism that takes the time to interrogate the scholarly orthodoxies that invariably seem to establish themselves in any given field of inquiry. If *borderlands* has always offered a home to a politically and ethically invested criticism that is situated in the interstices of disciplines and that, from the space (or non-space) of these interstices, is able to interrogate prevailing disciplinary assumptions, the five contributions gathered together for this issue bring much-needed critical scrutiny to a strikingly diverse set of disciplines and debates. Ranging from a consideration of the state of the discipline of International Relations to a rereading of Marx's *Capital*, from an interrogation of the politics of whiteness studies to an analysis of Italian neo-colonial practices, all five contributions to this

issue of *borderlands* enact the kind of dual responsibility Miller associates with an 'ethics of reading'. That is, the authors read their respective texts responsibly—slowly, carefully, and attending as much to the explicit signposts they encounter along the way (rhetoric, style, etc.) as to the blind spots that inevitably inhabit each text—while never losing sight of their simultaneous responsibility to 'the social, institutional, political realms'.

Of the five articles, it is the first, Daniel Levine's 'International Theory and the Problem of Sustainable Critique: An Adornian-Biblical Parable,' that perhaps enacts this double responsibility most self-reflexively, thus setting the tone for the issue as a whole. Drawing on Genesis 34 as a Biblical parable, Levine problematizes the act of reading per se. He argues that because interpretation governs reading, it closes down a '*constellation of latent possibilities*' of meaning. Because, as he says, '[o]ne cannot read ... without choosing, and thereby imposing something of oneself onto the event depicted', the parable 'reveals the responsibility that inheres in reading and interpreting'. Out of a wish that 'the act of reading be something other than a vehicle for readers trading in exclusionary acts of reification', he argues for 'a particular kind of reflexivity' which allows for 'the insufficiency of one's own thinking [to be] kept constantly, *sustainably*, in view'. Such 'sustainable critique' is urgently required, he suggests, in the field of International Relations, where it has the much-needed effect of '*slowing down* of thought, of *weighing it down* in the face of the speed, danger, and urgency of politics and national security'.

The second essay, Nicole Pepperell's 'The Bond of Fragmentation: On Marx, Hegel, and the Social Determination of the Material World', revisits hegemonic understandings of the social impact of capitalism. Pepperell suggests that while this impact is commonly 'framed in terms of 'social fragmentation'', this understanding 'might be bound to a one-sided conception of capitalism'. Asking 'whether it might be possible to construct a less one-sided understanding of capitalism—whether there might be any sense in which we can grasp capitalism as generative of some particular kind of social bond, a bond with ambivalent potentials', she proposes to develop 'a new reading of Marx's complex dialogue with Hegel.' This new reading—a slow, careful reading which engages in detail with Marx's stylistic strategies in *Capital*—is motivated by her contention that previous 'interpreters have leapt too quickly to the assumption that Marx was somehow *applying* [Hegel's] method in earnest', and suggests, instead, that 'while Marx is indeed in constant dialogue with Hegel's method in *Capital*, his interaction with Hegel is much more playful and irreverent than the 'new dialectical' Hegelian Marxists tend to assume'. Resonating strongly with Miller's double responsibility of reading, Pepperell's essay offers not just a new reading of *Capital* that is, in Miller's terms, 'responsive to it, respectful of it'; it also uses this highly responsive reading responsibly: asking what may be at stake in the reading for the socio-political realm, specifically for a revised

conception of the social bond enabled by capitalism, the essay *enacts* its responsibility to this realm.

A similar double gesture is at work in the third essay, Maria Giannacopoulos's '*Nomophilia and Bia: The Love of Law and the Question of Violence*'. This essay turns its critical eye to theories of race and whiteness, and carefully rereads a range of prominent contributions to Australia's asylum seeker debate (Don McMaster's *Asylum Seekers: Australia's Response to Refugees*, Mary Crock and Ben Saul's *Future Seekers: Refugees and the Law in Australia*, and Ghassan Hage's *Against Paranoid Nationalism*) to point to a central blind spot at the heart of these ostensibly anti-colonial contributions: an unexamined *nomophilia*, love of (Eurocentric) law. Such *nomophilia*, Giannacopoulos suggests, 'in effect disallows a complete critique of colonial relations since it skims over the structural colonial dimensions of white law'. As in Levine's and Pepperell's contributions, then, the close rereading of a text here stands in the service of more broadly political aims—in this case, to effect a radicalisation of anti-colonial critique in Australia by highlighting the law's silent complicity with the perpetuation of colonial relations.

The fourth essay, Lorenzo Veracini's '*On Settleness*', continues with the theme of settler-colonial relations. Implicitly rereading dominant postcolonial understandings of the colonial situation, Veracini argues for 'the need to develop interpretative categories capable of accounting for the specificity of the settler colonial "situation"'. Primarily 'intended as a call for further research', the essay begins to develop such categories by focusing on three paradigms that distinguish settler nations from other postcolonial nations: the negotiation of structurally triangular (rather than binary) relations, the disavowal of indigenous presence, and a libidinal economy that sees 'settlers *desire* differently from other colonists'. An appraisal of these three distinctive features, the author suggests, 'can contribute to an original interpretation of "whiteness" in settler colonial contexts'.

The final essay, Lorenzo Rinelli's '*Fanta-sizing Culture: Italian Soda Pop, Neocolonial Hawai'i and the Global Facialization Machine*', draws our attention to a further geographical context which remains somewhat tangential to the dominant postcolonial paradigm: Italian colonialism. Unlike Veracini, however, Rinelli seeks to illustrate the perhaps unexpected productivity of the postcolonial paradigm vis-à-vis his geographical object, insisting that much can be gained by reading contemporary Italian practices of representation within a postcolonial framework. Capitalising on his 'capacity not only as a national subject but, more importantly, as a critic, to read between the lines of Italian language and society', Rinelli argues that 'contemporary Italian society reveals an unresolved postcolonial anxiety'. He illustrates this argument by juxtaposing his reading of the Italian response to the 2006 Fanta advertising campaign with a discussion of Herman Melville's *Typee*, a juxtaposition which allows him to identify 'a line of continuity, a signifying chain between

yesterday and today': between historical and contemporary colonial attitudes in Italy. He suggests that it is precisely the general obliviousness to Italy's colonial history that facilitates the unreflective perpetuation of colonial violence that he diagnoses in contemporary Italian society: 'The lack of academic and social debate about its colonial campaigns', he suggests, 'left a permanent stain within Italian society, a society that still finds broadcasts of denigratory visual representations of other cultures perfectly acceptable'.

I would like to thank the entire *borderlands* collective, as well as our authors, referees and reviewers, for the time and thought they have invested in this issue. The five essays gathered here may be diverse in subject matter, but what reverberates powerfully through all of them is a deep commitment to the values embodied by slow criticism, that is, to a form of criticism which takes the time to interrogate well-worn narratives. Such criticism requires us, as Nietzsche says, 'to go aside, to take time, to become still, to become slow,' and it begins with reading slowly, responsibly. It is my hope that, just as our authors have taken their time over reading their texts, and I have taken my time over putting this issue together, our readers will now take their time over reading these five essays—granting themselves that which, in today's academy, may increasingly appear like a luxury, but which must be preserved as the non-negotiable condition of possibility for any criticism worthy of the name: the time 'to read *well*, that is to say, to read slowly, deeply, looking cautiously before and aft, with reservations, with doors left open, with delicate eyes and fingers...'

Notes

¹ Although there are undoubtedly synergies and sympathies, what I am here calling 'slow criticism' is not to be confused with the Slow Criticism Project instituted by the Dutch film journal *De Filmkrant*, which seeks to provide 'refuge for wayward articles that too seldom find their way to print, because they are considered too philosophical, personal, political or poetic'. None-the-less, the journal's self-conscious attempt to provide 'a counterbalance to the commodification of film journalism' certainly resonates with my own advocacy for a form of cultural criticism informed by critical self-reflexivity and social responsibility. For more information on the Slow Criticism Project, see http://www.filmkrant.nl/slowcriticism_2009.

² Although I insist here that the idea of slow reading is much older than the recent slow movement, it is surely not accidental that this insatiable fascination with all things slow should have also spawned a short book on slow reading: J Miedema, *Slow Reading* (2009).

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