Who can "slow down" in the neoliberal academy? Reflections on the politics of time as an early-career feminist geographer in Switzerland

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Abstract. Feminist geographers' calls for "slow scholarship" as resistance to the neoliberal university raise poignant questions about who can enact slow scholarship and under what conditions. In this intervention, I engage critical notions of time in human geography to explore the fraught relationship between precarious early-career researchers (ECRs) and slow scholarship. To do so, I reflect on my experiences as a female early-career geographer with a 1-year postdoctoral contract in Switzerland and "foreign" researcher. While many ECRs aspire to "slow down" and conduct more caring research, we face pressures to "speed up" our outputs in a competitive academic job market. I show how precarity (re-)shapes and limits possibilities for collaborative research practices, given that building and sustaining collaborations takes time. This pertains to collaboration not only in "the field" but within our teams, institutions, and communities. I then explore how precarity unevenly impacts early-career women, who often occupy more precarious academic positions and undertake more care work in the academy and home. This is not only limiting women's career progression but shaping decisions about the future, including when and whether to have children. I illustrate how early-career precarity is marked by different "clocks" and ways of measuring time, including academic age, biological clocks, and visa clocks. Finally, I present strategies to collectively navigate and challenge the pressures of neoliberal academia at the everyday and structural levels. Overall, this paper shows how the conditions for undertaking slow scholarship are unevenly distributed and argues that this must inform recruitment and efforts to create more just and caring universities.

1 Introduction

In this intervention, I engage with critical notions of time in human geography to investigate the often-fraught relationship between early-career researchers[1] (ECRs) and "slow scholarship" (Mountz et al., 2015). While many ECRs aspire to "slow down" and conduct more caring and collaborative research, we face pressures to "speed up" our outputs, grant capture, and productivity in a competitive academic job market. Experiences of precarity are shaped not only by time but by context and social difference. I focus primarily on the intersection of career stage and gender, these being the promi-

nent forms of social difference that have shaped my experiences as a female ECR. These reflections stem from my situated and inevitably partial perspective as an ECR with a 1-year contract at a Swiss university and as a "foreign" researcher and temporary resident. I am Australian and completed my PhD at the University of Melbourne in August 2024 before relocating to commence a postdoctoral fellowship in Lausanne the following month[2]. These ideas emerged as a series of diary entries and notes scrawled on my phone and scraps of paper as I navigated the demands of prepar-

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[1] I use the term ECR to describe researchers who have completed their doctoral studies and are early in their academic careers (Hughes, 2021:1733).

[2] My position is funded by a Swiss Government Excellence Scholarship. PhD and postdoctoral researchers on this scholarship receive a lower salary than standard rates for the equivalent position in Switzerland and are "categorised differently, which can often create exclusions and difficulties" (Myat, 2024:272).

ing multiple grant and job applications, alongside publishing from my PhD, pursuing new research, and moving internationally. I organised these notes into themes for analysis before sharing drafts with colleagues for discussion. My empirical material comes from observations and discussions – both incidental and intentional – with early-career colleagues and academic workers of all career stages.

Feminist and critical geographers have called for "slow scholarship" as resistance to the demands of the neoliberal university (Mountz et al., 2015) and the "compressed timescapes of the University Industrial Complex" (Davies, 2022:410). Slow scholarship advocates for the building of collaborative and caring relations to counter the "fast-paced, metric-oriented neoliberal university" (Mountz et al., 2015:1236). Yet this raises poignant questions about who can engage in slow scholarship and under what conditions. Not everyone is in a position to "slow down", including precarious ECRs on short-term contracts. Instead, Meyerhoff and Noterman (2019) call for "revolutionary scholarship by any speed necessary" that dismantles systems of oppression. These debates reflect that time – who controls time and has control over their time, and whose time is (under-)valued – is central to the pressures and precarity faced by ECRs in the neoliberal university. As Pickerill (2024:2) attests, what connects the "multiple intensifications of demands on academics … is how we value, use, and understand time". To contribute to these debates, I illustrate how early-career precarity is marked by different "clocks" and ways of measuring time, including academic age, biological clocks, and visa clocks, that shape decisions about the future.

Precarity can be understood as a condition of uncertainty and insecurity; it also contains possibilities for mobilisation (Waite, 2009:412). Precarity is produced by specific political and institutional contexts, and geographers have shown how racialised capitalism and neoliberal labour market practices produce and exacerbate precarity (Waite, 2009; Strauss, 2020). Experiences of precarity are shaped by multiple axes of social difference including class, race, ability, gender, nationality, and more (Hughes, 2021:1727). In "western" university contexts, early-career women often occupy more precarious academic positions and dedicate more time to care work within the university and home (Ballif and Zinn, 2024; Steinþórsdóttir et al., 2019; Henry, 2018). These factors, alongside structural barriers, are affecting women's research productivity and career progression within the prevailing "publish or perish" model of academia, which values quantitative metric-based measures and undervalues social reproductive labour (Caretta and Webster, 2016). Drawing on feminist scholarship, I detail how precarity (re-)shapes not only research practices and possibilities for collaboration, but also ECRs' personal lives and decisions about the future.

Next, I examine the "paradox between slowing down and keeping up" for ECRs in the neoliberal academy (Kaufman et al., 2024:380). I illustrate how the accelerated pace of neoliberal universities makes it difficult for ECRs to enact "slower"

practices of collaboration and care not only in "the field" but within our teams, institutions, and communities. I then explore how precarity complicates decision-making about the future and especially for ECRs considering if and when to have children. To conclude, I present strategies to *collectively* navigate and challenge the demands of neoliberal academia at the everyday and structural levels.

2 Who can enact "slow scholarship" in fast-paced neoliberal academia?

Neoliberalism has been defined as a "contextually contingent articulation of free market governmental practices" that is often characterised by "illiberal forms of social and political rule" (Sparke, 2006:153). This intervention is timely given the hollowing out of academia by right-wing governments in the United States, Argentina, and elsewhere, alongside authoritarian practices that suppress freedom of speech and assembly on campus and "target critical scholarship that interrogates and challenges injustice" (Nkula-Wenz and Larsen, 2024:253). Since the turn of the century, critical geographers have raised concerns about the neoliberalisation of the university and emergence of a "higher education sausage factory" (Smith, 2000:330). This is characterised by reduced state funding; increased contingent labour; and demands for more outputs, grant capture, and higher productivity under compressed time frames (Mountz et al., 2015:1237). The neoliberal restructuring of universities is seeing entire departments being merged or dismantled, job losses, and workforce casualisation.

The uneven embodied effects of neoliberal academia include mental health crises and burnout (Kaufman et al., 2024), including for ECRs juggling multiple job applications, publications, and expectations of academic mobility, as I can attest based on my experiences and conversations with early-career colleagues. This is exacerbated for scholars with caring responsibilities – particularly women – and disabling conditions (Kaufman et al., 2024). Thriving in the neoliberal university often seems incompatible with "a life outside work, a family, activism, or even sleep" (Pickerill, 2024:2). Addressing precarity matters because "our working conditions are a vital political space that we must attend to if we are going to … sustain radical geography" (Pickerill, 2024:5). While feminist geographers have called for "slow scholarship" to resist the neoliberal university, not everyone is in a position to "slow down". Feminist and critical disability studies scholars have demonstrated that ideas about time and slowness are relative and often shaped by able-bodied norms (Kafer, 2013)[3]. For instance, notions of crip time high-

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[3]Geographer Elisabetta Crovara and artist Marta Figueiredo (Crovara and Figueiredo, 2025) produced a sculptural and performative art installation oriented around a "crip time clock" to highlight the tensions between expectations of "fast" productivity and divergent experiences of chronic illness and time.

light how "disabled people might need more time to accomplish something or to arrive somewhere" (Kafer, 2013:26). As Kaufman et al. (2024:383) reflect, it is universities' perception of time and productivity, rather than disabling conditions, that "slow us".

Swiss universities are largely publicly funded and considered to be relatively privileged places to work, with high wages across academic positions. Yet these privileges are not distributed equally. Over the past 2 decades, there has been an increase in short-term research positions, while permanent positions have remained relatively unchanged (Ballif and Zinn, 2024:2217). Around 80 % of academic workers are employed on fixed-term contracts (Laketa and Côte, 2023:577)[4]. This pertains to mid-level staff (in French *corps intérmediaire* and German *Mittelbau*) including doctoral and postdoctoral researchers, teaching assistants, scientific collaborators, and non-tenured assistant professors. Short-term postdoctoral contracts "promote uncertainty and competitiveness, restrict academics in their future planning, encourage unpaid overtime, and often lead to involuntary mobility" (Ryffel et al., 2022:577). For these reasons, a collective of mid-level staff submitted a petition to the Swiss Federal Assembly demanding more permanent jobs and better working conditions[5]. Professorial staff occupy less than 10 % of positions, less than a quarter of whom are women, and there is a "lack of racial and ethnic minorities among the professorial staff", although exact numbers remain unknown (Laketa and Côte, 2023:577). Faria et al. (2019) argue that the discipline of geography remains "persistently white", as reflected by low recruitment and retention of faculty of colour – especially women – in the United States. Geographers from and/or based outside the Anglosphere and Global North are further burdened by the discipline's Euro- and Anglo-centric knowledge production (Strauss, 2020:1213; Müller et al., 2025; Schurr et al., 2020).

Many postdoctoral positions and early-career grants have a duration of 1 or 2 years and provide limited prospects for long-term employment. Lectureships are often offered on a per semester basis or paid hourly. This leaves ECRs on a treadmill of constant grant and job applications, which are gruelling, time-consuming, and competitive. ECRs with middle- and upper-class backgrounds may be willing to take on more precarity and risk than those without this safety net. The early-career stage is marked by one's "academic age", which measures the time that a researcher has been actively engaged in research since PhD completion. At a certain academic age, ECR status and eligibility for early-career schemes expires. In Australia, this is colloquially referred to as the "DECRA clock", as researchers are only eligible to apply for the country's main early-career funding scheme, the Discovery Early Career Researcher Award (DECRA), within 5 years of PhD completion. The Swiss National Science Foundation's (SNSF) Ambizione grant is only available within 4 years of PhD completion. Faced with time pressures to secure competitive grants with the hope of obtaining a longer-term academic position, ECRs are encouraged to use their time strategically, for instance, by publishing in high-ranking journals and acquiring grants.

Compounding this, there is an expectation of academic mobility – that ECRs will uproot their lives (and potentially their partners' and families' lives) for short-term academic opportunities – and that doing so is beneficial for our careers. In Switzerland, international mobility is considered "a hallmark of scientific excellence" and prerequisite for career progression (Ballif and Zinn, 2024:2221). Switzerland has the highest levels of outbound and inbound academic mobility in Europe (Sautier, 2021). Several early-career fellowships require mobility for eligibility including the European Union's Marie Skłodowska-Curie Postdoctoral Fellowship and SNSF's Postdoctoral Fellowship[6] and "Postdoc.Mobilty".

Mobility entails emotional labour as we uproot from social and family networks. Like many ECRs, my family and intimate relationships are stretched across geographic space – Europe, Southeast Asia, and Australia – and time zones. Who can cross international borders and with what level of risk is racialised, and this shapes and limits possibilities to participate in conferences, networking events, and fieldwork. Immigration-related paperwork also "bogs down" our time in uneven and often racialised ways[7]. My academic training and career have taken me to six countries across four continents. While I used to view academic mobility as only a privilege and opportunity, it is also becoming burdensome as my life stage changes (see Caretta and Webster, 2016:98).

While highlighting ECR precarity, I do not wish to homogenise experiences of precarity or equate this with the exploitation experienced by low-paid and migrant workers (Waite, 2009:417). While ECRs are marginalised within the

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[4]For comparison, in the Australian state of Victoria, where I completed my PhD, almost 70 % of academics are employed on short-term contracts (Smithers et al., 2023:102). In Germany, where academic precarity is a key flashpoint, as reflected by mobilisations around the hashtag #IchBinHanna (I am Hanna), 87 % of academics hold fixed-term contracts (Wagner, 2021).

[5]See https://campaign.petition-academia.ch/text-de-fr-it-en/ (last access: 28 May 2025).

[6]Applicants must not have resided in the country of the proposed host institution for a specified time before applying.

[7]Once, when applying for a residence permit, I was asked to provide an enormous amount of paperwork beyond what is required for Australian citizens. I rushed to compile this before departure, foregoing time with family. I was later informed that I was mistakenly assumed to be a Chinese citizen, based on my name, even though I was applying from Australia as an Australian citizen. As an Australian, I am often exempt from such time-consuming immigration-related burdens that non-white and Global South researchers are subjected to. I reflect on my experiences as a "mixed-race" scholar conducting fieldwork in Southeast Asia in previous work (Fung, 2024b).

academy, they may occupy privileged positions in terms of class and other markers of difference. Moreover, the precarity and privilege of different groups are intertwined. Within the uneven "temporal architectures" of the university, "the (slow) scholarship of tenured faculty is dependent on the (sped-up) time and labour" of precarious academics and service workers (Meyerhoff and Noterman, 2019:217–218). "Our" academic careers and the reproduction of universities are predicated on the precarious, gendered, and racialised labour of cleaners, caretakers, chefs who prepare food in cafeterias, and off-campus workers, as well as unpaid care work (Meyerhoff and Noterman, 2019; Henry, 2018).

Given that the precarity of ECRs is well-documented, what I seek to highlight is how precarity (re-)shapes research practices and possibilities for collaboration. Feminist geographers have positioned collaboration as a strategy for conducting more ethical research that is shaped by and useful to participants, an approach that I have extended based on collaborative fieldwork with civil society actors in Thailand and the Salween River Basin (Fung, 2024b). This work emphasises that building trust and collaboration takes time and "a slow approach, through making concrete contributions in the short and long-term" (Butcher, 2020:12). For Ritterbusch (2019:1297), the collaborative relationships that underpin social-justice-oriented research are "forged through shared commitment, collective care and acts of consciousness-building, [and] take time to cultivate and keep alive". At a minimum, collaborative approaches seek to avoid extractive research practices or "parachute science", where "expert" researchers "drop in" to extract data and knowledge without meaningfully engaging with participants or supporting their struggles (Guasco, 2022; Singeo and Ferguson, 2022). Yet "slow" approaches to collaboration are "threatened by the fast-paced productivity requirements" of neoliberal academia (Caretta and Faria, 2020:172).

As an ECR, I feel pressure to use time "efficiently" to produce outputs and secure grants and employment before my 1-year contract expires. I have less time for collaborative activities, whether writing and thinking with colleagues and collaborators or spending time in "the field" to cultivate and sustain the relationships that I developed during 9 months of PhD fieldwork in 2021–2022. My Thai language skills have also deteriorated since leaving the field. Yet sustaining such relationships and language skills are necessary for future collaborative research, placing ECRs in a difficult position.

Slow approaches do not inherently produce ethical and meaningful collaborations, nor is collaboration and social-justice-oriented work always slow. For example, Salween civil society collaborators and residents often requested that I document their struggles over development and provide faster access to research outputs, with the goal of using this to challenge state-led development. These actors face the looming threat of long-proposed hydropower dams and water diversions that would displace them from land and livelihoods (Fung, 2024a) and "foreclose" possibilities for

the future (Koch, 2013). In this context, they requested evidence that could support their struggles to halt or delay these projects before they materialise. This required finding ways to share findings more quickly, for instance, through public-facing outputs co-authored with collaborators (see Fung and Nawanat, 2023; Fung et al., 2022). This illustrates that *who* calls for speed, and controls the tempo of knowledge production, matters. Yet such outputs, even if more useful to collaborators, are generally less valued in academic recruitment and promotion processes than peer-reviewed articles.

The expansion of online methods and modes of collaboration, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic, provides one pathway to build and sustain meaningful collaborations, even with limited time for long-term in-person fieldwork. Online activities also enable the participation of those with caring responsibilities and/or limited mobility (Bhakta, 2022). Following Guasco's (2022) "ethic of not (always) going there", I found it generative to conduct fieldwork, develop collaborations, and co-write online. By understanding "the field" as a set of political commitments, rather than bounded in time and space, we can expand the ways in which we access "the field" and collaborate, even from "afar" (Fung, 2024b). Another option would be to conduct fieldwork within or near the places we reside, although again, this is challenging for ECRs who move frequently to pursue academic opportunities.

Within my team and institute, early-career colleagues and I have noted thematic (political ecology), methodological (feminist and decolonial), and geographic (Southeast Asia-focus) crossovers in our work and possibilities for collaboration. Yet we find it difficult to prioritise exploratory discussions that may or may not lead to outputs amidst a range of competing and more "urgent" demands. Publication timelines are notoriously slow and do not align with the accelerated demands of the neoliberal university, nor collaborators' calls for faster access to research outputs, as noted above. High-quality peer review processes take time, particularly as academic workers face ever-increasing workloads and demands on their time. It often takes over a year for a journal article to be published (i.e. longer than some contracts, leading to risks of unpaid labour). Yet ECRs also note that delayed publications can jeopardise job applications (Hsu, 2025).

Participating in community and activist initiatives is core to the praxis of many feminist and radical geographers (e.g. Sultana, 2023; Ritterbusch, 2019). Yet precarity and the demands of neoliberal capitalism reduce the time and energy available for this. At the end of a workday, I have found it difficult to motivate myself to attend online "Scientist Rebellion" meetings. I am yet to allocate time to learning the French language, which would enable me to more fully participate in initiatives in Lausanne including community gardens and university-level organising for Palestine. Rather than more time, ECRs need a revision of how "our time" is organised, used, and valued in and by the neoliberal university (see Hughes, 2021:1730). This section highlights

a range of tensions underlying feminist practices of "slow scholarship" in the neoliberal university through attention to the intersectional politics of time. ECRs on short-term contracts face pressures to produce ever-more outputs at faster speeds in a competitive academic "marketplace", and this goes against the time it takes to build and nurture meaningful collaborations. While I suggest small ways forward, addressing this requires structural change.

3 Clocks, care, and contradictions: uneven care burdens in academia

Gender intersects with precarity and career stage in a range of ways that exacerbate entrenched gender inequities within and outside the academy. In terms of structural barriers, female academics face high levels of bias, sexism, and sexual harassment, and those who complain are often "ignored or retaliated against ... the outcome is the severe attrition of female academics" (Boivin et al., 2023:1). Women of colour often face multiple burdens of racism and sexism in the academy and are overburdened by expectations to "appear more" to represent "diversity" (Ahmed, 2019; Meyerhoff and Noterman, 2019). In Europe, women continue to occupy more precarious academic positions, while men occupy more senior and secure positions (Steinþórsdóttir et al., 2019:2). In Switzerland, women are more likely to hold very short contracts of 12 months or less and work part-time (Morris et al., 2024:31). Compounding this, research shows that female academics undertake a disproportionate share of care work within the university and home (Henry, 2018; Viglione, 2020), as Ballif and Zinn (2024:2215) explain:

> a common thread connects the gendered division of reproductive labour within households and care work in academia: as academic women take on a greater share of teaching and service responsibilities, they essentially assume the role of "taking care of the academic family" ... Consequently, we view domestic tasks, childcare, academic teaching, and service as interconnected dimensions of care work.

The uneven distribution of care work has consequences for academic careers between genders and within the heterogenous category of "academic women" (Ballif and Zinn, 2024:2217). Early-career women (ECW) undertake an outsized proportion of "academic housework" (Henry, 2018:1371). Women often have higher teaching and administrative roles and dedicate more time to academic service, defined as activities that aim to secure future benefit for others (Järvinen and Mik-Meyer, 2024). Yet these activities remain undervalued in academic recruitment processes (Ballif and Zinn, 2024:2215). This reflects the broader devaluing of care work and socially reproductive labour under capitalism, "despite its pivotal role for economic growth and the opera-

tion of capitalist societies and institutions" (Ballif and Zinn, 2024)[8].

Even prior to COVID-19, research showed that academic mothers take on a larger share of unpaid reproductive labour in the home and struggle to balance work, family, and expectations of mobility (Ballif and Zinn, 2024:2215). The pandemic then "exacerbated the preexisting unequal distribution of carework within families and institutions" (Ballif and Zinn, 2024). Reflecting this, a plethora of studies show that men's research productivity rose, while women's declined, during COVID-19 lockdowns, exacerbating existing gender gaps (e.g. King and Frederickson, 2021; Inno et al., 2020; Viglione, 2020). Compounding this, many ECRs experienced delays and interruptions to their research, with enduring consequences for career trajectories (Ballif and Zinn, 2024:2223; Fung, 2024b).

The multiple pressures faced by ECW are reflected by the "leaky pipeline" phenomena[9], whereby the proportion of women – especially women of colour – decreases with each step in the post-PhD academic career ladder, with a sharp drop-off after the postdoctoral stage (Schurr et al., 2020:318–319; Faria et al., 2019; Dubois-Shaik and Fusulier, 2023). This is pervasive across all disciplines (Boivin et al., 2023). In German-speaking counties of Europe, women make up more than 50 % of bachelor's degrees, and the proportion of men and women in postdoctoral positions is roughly even. Yet the percentage of women in full professorships is just 22 % in Germany, 23 % in Switzerland, and 28 % in Austria (Hizli et al., 2023). Between 2012–2022, only 36 % of Ambizione grants were awarded to women, highlighting that "women are still underrepresented in the Swiss research landscape" (SNSF, 2023).

Research links the "leaky pipeline" to the quality of childcare infrastructure and family policies, for which Switzerland continues to be ranked "at the bottom" (Zimmermann et al., 2021:16). In 2025, the Economist ranked Switzerland as the fourth-worse place to be a working woman in the OECD, primarily due to high childcare costs and limited parental leave (The Economist, 2025). Paternity leave is particularly restricted, with fathers receiving just 2 weeks' paid leave (FSIO, 2022). Women often reduce or stop paid work when they become mothers (FOGE, 2023a). Of people aged between 25–54, 56.7 % of women are part-time employed compared to just 14.6 % of men (FOGE, 2023b). As women undertake more unpaid care work, they have lower pensions and a higher risk of poverty in older age (FOGE, 2023a). Despite comparable education levels, women earn on average 18 % less than men (FOGE, 2023a). These trends are

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[8]Social reproduction is concerned with how lives, workers, and capitalist society are sustained on an everyday basis and over time (Guermond et al., 2025:459).

[9]This metaphor has also been critiqued for its "passivity" and homogenising the struggles of differently positioned academic workers (Sheppard et al., 2023:4).

reflected in Swiss academia and reinforce gender imbalances amongst academic workers (Morris et al., 2024:32–33).

Academic precarity also has personal implications, underscoring the feminist maxim that "the personal is political". ECW often perceive a trade-off between having a family and an academic career (Dubois-Shaik and Fusulier, 2023:11). Overall, female academics are less likely than their male counterparts to have children (Hughes, 2021:1731), perhaps to avoid the so-called "baby penalty" levied on the academic careers of women who choose to have children (Mason, 2013). The capacity of ECRs to make decisions about the future, including about when and whether to have children, is shaped by precarity and expectations of mobility (Hughes, 2021). Many ECW face conflicting advice about locating an "opportune time" to have children[10]. There is the pressure of an ever-ticking "biological clock" and that "time is running out" to have children. This collides with advice to "wait for a permanent contract" (Hughes, 2021) or "wait until the dissertation is finished" (Tungohan, 2025) before having children. The emphasis on "waiting" problematically assumes that if we persist, we will be rewarded with a permanent job in the future (Hughes, 2021:1726).

In contrast, colleagues based in Norway and Sweden chose to have children during their PhD because it provides relatively stable employment and parental leave compared to post-PhD precarity. In both countries, parental leave is shared and a portion is non-transferrable, meaning that if a father does not take parental leave it is forfeited (Lind, 2024). There are also "strategic times" to undergo invasive procedures associated with in vitro fertilisation (IVF), for instance, during summer break when academics are relieved of teaching duties and administrative meetings (Tungohan, 2025). Yet the "temporal politics of (in)fertility" do not align with ideals of the productive, mobile, and unencumbered neoliberal academic subject, and discussions about (in)fertility are often rendered to the "private" sphere (Hughes, 2021:1731).

Decisions about childbearing are further complicated for ECRs with precarious residency statuses tied to university employment. My time in Switzerland is tracked by a "visa clock", with my Swiss residence permit expiring soon after my contract expires. Yet as an Australian citizen, I am in a position of relative privilege to secure different visas and with the possibility to return to a country not afflicted by war or civil strife (cf. Myat, 2024). Although I am in my 30s, I would not consider having children, given my precarious employment and residency status. Overall, decisions about the timing and possibilities of having children are shaped not only by biological clocks but by the rhythms and demands of neoliberal academia and conditions of precarity.

4   Conclusions: where do we go from here?

In this intervention, I examine the fraught relationship between ECRs and "slow scholarship" in the context of fast-paced neoliberal academia. ECRs face compounding pressures to produce ever-more outputs, secure funding, and string together multiple short-term contracts alongside expectations of academic mobility within compressed time frames. This makes it difficult for ECRs to enact the ideals of slow scholarship and build collaborations in our fieldsites, institutions, and communities. We inhabit vastly different positions to "slow down" and transform the machinery of the neoliberal university or the "sausage factory" (Smith, 2000). The strategies we enact to navigate and challenge these conditions must be collective and built around our differentiated capacities and social locations.

ECR precarity is characterised by impermanence, unpredictability, and uncertain futures. It is marked and mediated by multiple "clocks" and ways of ordering time including academic age, short-term contracts, visa clocks, biological clocks, and IVF cycles. Overall, ECRs need more protected time to think, collaborate, conduct fieldwork, write, and build community. Reorienting "our" time towards these activities requires job stability and realistic pathways to long-term positions. This would require broader structural changes to the neoliberal university, funding models, and the activities and outputs that are valued in academic recruitment (see Henry, 2018; Mountz et al., 2016). Along these lines, there are growing efforts to evaluate research based on quality rather than quantitative metric-based measures (see Zimmermann et al., 2021:10–11), as per the "Declaration on Research Assessment" (DORA)[11]. The DORA principles are increasingly being adopted by institutions and funding agencies, including the SNSF in grant evaluation. This is an important step towards tackling the pressure and impulse to publish ever-more outputs. The SNSF has also expanded their conceptualisation of mobility to include not only physical mobility but more qualitative aspects including intellectual, interdisciplinary, and intersectoral mobility.

Alongside this, there needs to be stronger emphasis on scholars' efforts to create caring and convivial research relations and environments. Valuing/evaluating this in recruitment processes may chip away at persistent gender inequities in academia. Time and waiting for change will not resolve the "leaky pipeline". Addressing this requires a cultural shift in academia and policy action. This includes policies to support academics with caring responsibilities, such as improved shared parental leave and carer's leave, and high-quality and affordable childcare infrastructure, which is much needed in Switzerland (Zimmermann et al., 2021:16). Calls for care in the academy are sparking changes. For example, the American Association of Geographers (AAG) has their Caregiving Affinity Group that organises high-quality, professionalised

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[10]I refer to ECW to reflect my experiences as a cisgender woman, noting that some people who do not identify as women can become pregnant.

[11]See https://sfdora.org/ (last access: 28 May 2025).

childcare at the annual AAG meeting, building on years of informal and voluntary childcare efforts[12].

How (else) can we tackle precarity in the neoliberal academy? Pickerill (2024:5) calls on scholars to enact resistance "in particular spaces, moments, and in our practices. It is important not to individualise this or suggest that we should simply all slow down". This intervention reiterates feminists' calls to build collectives and "connective spaces" (Hilbrandt and Ren, 2025:24). Slow scholarship is an important, if imperfect, call for collectivity. In response to debates about who can "slow down", Mountz et al. (2016) (re-)position and "articulate a vision of slow scholarship that does not ignore questions of precarity and vulnerability, but engages these as primary reasons we need slow scholarship. For us, this is not a project of the self, but of the collective". I suggest that building multiple "networks of solidarity"[13] can enable us to collectively navigate and challenge the neoliberal university in ways that are attuned to social difference. These networks may be between ECRs, or female scholars, or researchers with similar ethical orientations and political commitments. Reframing the work of building and participating in such networks as "part of the job" and work time and valuing this in recruitment processes would support scholars to "make time" for such activities.

For example, one of the most generative academic environments I have encountered was an online feminist reading group in 2020–2021 during my PhD that brought together ECRs and a permanent mid-career researcher with a shared commitment to feminist research ethics. Alongside critical discussions about slow scholarship and feminist methodologies, we provided mutual support to navigate COVID-19 and the challenges of conducting fieldwork under such conditions. We progressed through academic milestones together including publishing, organising conference panels, and job applications. The relationships fostered here persist even though many of us have completed our PhDs and moved to other institutions. The mid-career researcher created the structure and space for this network to flourish, which we collectively shaped. Participation was incorporated as part of our role as PhD researchers rather than being additional work or taking place "outside" work hours.

While these networks may not "fix" precarity or resolve structural issues, they create space for sustained critical discussions and relationship building, which can provide the basis for further political action. There is scope for critical geographers to forge alliances with broader labour, environmental, and justice movements (Meyerhoff and Noterman,

2019:237). An example is the Decolonial Practices group at the Rachel Carson Centre in Munich, where I lived prior to Lausanne. This group actively engages "in decolonisation efforts through praxis-oriented approaches" by organising and participating in protests with community and activist groups and hosting film screenings, poetry readings, food foraging, and more[14]. These efforts highlight how academic workers and activists can collectively put decolonial theory into practice in struggles within and beyond the university.

Strategies to navigate and challenge the neoliberal university can be differentiated by career stage. ECRs can orient their time to developing peer networks, collectively devising strategies, and identifying allies in more senior positions to enact structural change. Meanwhile, established researchers can use their privileged temporal positions to provide mentorship (see Caretta and Faria, 2020) and invest time into building long-lasting "networks of solidarity", given the temporary nature of many ECR positions. They can demand and create improved conditions and opportunities for ECRs. For example, while "faculty members protest the bureaucratisation of the university and its neoliberal demand for 'productivity' ... we routinely replicate it in one of the few practices we actually control" – recruitment (Peters, 2025). Simplifying recruitment processes could reduce the temporal and emotional burdens placed on ECRs. As this paper demonstrates, the conditions for undertaking "slow scholarship" are unevenly distributed and this must be accounted for in recruitment processes.

Unions are also important avenues to demand improved working conditions. For example, a strike of 48 000 academic workers, mostly ECRs, at the University of California over a 40-day period in late-2022 resulted in higher wages, particularly for the lowest paid workers, as well as improved medical benefits and childcare subsidies (Hawkins and Kern, 2024:60; Associated Press, 2022). In Switzerland, unions are demanding more permanent jobs and better employment conditions, including via the nationwide campaign "Stable Jobs–Better Science"[15]. In June 2023, the ACIDUL (the association for mid-level staff at the University of Lausanne (UNIL)) and SSP (the cantonal public service union) submitted a petition to UNIL demanding increased wages for doctoral researchers funded by the SNSF, amongst other demands. The petition provided a basis for negotiations. While not all demands were met, in May 2025, the UNIL rectorate agreed to increase wages[16]. Overall, unions can provide a

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[12]See https://www.aag.org/groups/caregiving-affinity-group/ and https://www.aag.org/caregiving-and-conference-going/ (last access: 2 April 2025).

[13]I borrow this term from Julia Steinberger, who proposes building "networks of solidarity" to organise and challenge rising neoliberalism and fascism (e.g. https://bsky.app/profile/jksteinberger.bsky.social/post/3lhnwe3ufxy2f, last access: 27 May 2025).

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[14]See https://decolonialpractices.wordpress.com/ and https://www.instagram.com/decolonial.practices/ (last access: 28 May 2025).

[15]See https://vpod.ch/campa/stablejobs-betterscience-en/ (last access: 28 May 2025).

[16]SNSF-funded doctoral researchers will gain 90 % of a full-time salary of doctoral assistants as of October 2025 (Katharina Keil, personal communication, May 2025). See also https://wp.unil.ch/acidul/achievements/ (last access: 29 May 2025).

platform for workers to enact solidarity, engage in negotiations, and achieve (incremental) improvements in labour conditions.

When I shared a draft of this paper with colleagues, I was asked the following: what do alternatives to neoliberal academia look like? While I cannot provide a detailed outline of this, at least in this short intervention, what I do know is that prefiguring an alternative is a *collective* endeavour. This intervention is then an invitation for further critical discussion, collaboration, and action on this topic.

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