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# The Poethics of Scholarship



Kaja  
Marczewska



Janneke  
Adema



Frances  
McDonald



Whitney  
Trettien

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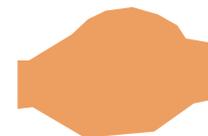
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## Introduction

This pamphlet explores ways in which to engage scholars to further elaborate the *poethics* of their scholarship. Following Joan Retallack, who has written extensively about the responsibility that comes with formulating and performing a poetics, which she has captured in her concept of *poethics* (with an added *h*), this pamphlet examines what connects the 'doing' of scholarship with the ethical components of research. Here, in order to remain ethical we are not able to determine in advance what being ethical would look like, yet, at the same time, ethical decisions need to be made and are being made as part of our publishing practices: where we publish and with whom, in an open way or not, in what form and shape and in which formats. Should we then consider the poethics of scholarship as a poetics of/as change, or as Retallack calls it, a poetics of the swerve (*clinamen*), which continuously unsettles our familiar notions?

This pamphlet considers how, along with discussions about the contents of our scholarship, and about the different methodologies, theories and politics that we use to give meaning and structure to our research, we should have similar deliberations about the way we *do* research. This involves paying more attention to the crafting of our own aesthetics and poetics as scholars, including a focus on the medial forms, the formats, and the graphic spaces in and through which we communicate and perform scholarship (and the discourses that surround these), as well as the structures and institutions that shape and determine our scholarly practices.

Kaja Marczewska tracks in her contribution OA's development from a radical and political project driven by experimental impetus, into a constrained model, limiting publishing in the service of the neoliberal university. Following Malik, she argues that OA in its dominant top-down implementation is determining the horizon of the publishable. Yet a horizon also suggests conditions of possibility for experimentation and innovation, which Marczewska locates in a potential OA ethos of poethics and praxis, in a fusion of attitude and form.

Janneke Adema explores in her paper the relationship between openness and experimentation in scholarly publishing, outlining how open access in specific has enabled a reimagining of its forms and practices. Whilst Adema emphasises that this relationship is far from guaranteed, through the concept of *scholarly poethics* she speculates on how we can forge a connection between the *doing* of scholarship and its political, ethical and aesthetical elements.

In the final contribution to this pamphlet Whitney Trettien and Frances McDonald ask a pertinent question: 'how can we build scholarly infrastructures that foster diffractive reading and writing?'. To address this question, they reflect on their own experiences of editing an experimental digital zine: *thresholds*, which brings the creative affordances of the split screen, of the gutter, to scholarship. By transforming materially how we publish, how we read and write together, McDonald and Trettien explore the potential of *thresholds* as a model for digital publishing more attuned to the ethics of entanglement.

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## The Horizon of The Publishable in/as Open Access: From Poethics to Praxis

Kaja  
Marczewska

I am writing this piece having just uploaded a PDF of my recent book to [aaaarg](#); a book published by Bloomsbury as a hardback academic monograph retailing at £86—and that is after the generous 10% discount offered on the publisher's website. The book focuses on copying and reproduction as perhaps the most prominent forms of contemporary cultural production. Given this focus, it seemed fitting to make the material available via this guerrilla library, to enable its different circulation and less controlled iterations. My decision to publish with Bloomsbury was a pragmatic one. As an early career academic working within UK higher education, I had little choice but to publish with an established press if I wanted to continue in the privileged position I currently find myself in. As someone interested in economies of cultural production, forms of publishing and self-organisation, the decision to breach my contract with the publisher offered a welcome and necessary respite from the discomfort I felt every time I saw my unaffordable (and perhaps as a result, unreadable) book for sale. It served as a way of acting (po)ethically within the system of which I am part. It was both a gesture of sharing, of making my book more widely available to a community that might otherwise be unable to access it, and a selfish act, enabling my ongoing existence within a system I

maintain by contributing to it for the sake of career progression and a regular salary. This transgression is unlikely to be noticed by my publisher (who probably does not care anyway).<sup>1</sup> It is a small and safe act of resistance, but it gestures towards the centrality of thinking about the poethics—the ethics and the aesthetics—of any act of making work public that is so crucial to all discussions of open access (OA) publishing.

I open with this personal reflection because I see my participation inside-outside of academic publishing as pertinent to thinking about the nature of OA today. Since its inception, OA publishing has rapidly transformed from a radical, disruptive project of sharing, making public, and community building, into one that under the guise of 'openness' and 'access' maintains the system that limits the possibilities of both. That is, OA has moved away from the politically motivated initiative that it once was, opening up spaces for publishing experimentation, to instead become a constrained and constraining model of publishing in the service of the neoliberal university. With this transformation of OA also come limitations on the forms of publication. The introduction of the OA requirement as one of the key criteria of REF-ability was one of the factors contributing to the loss of the experimental impetus that once informed the drive towards the OA model. My home institution, for example, requires its staff to deposit all our REF-able publications in a commercial, Elsevier-owned repository, as PDFs—even if they have been published in OA journals on custom-built platforms. The death-by-PDF that such institutionalised forms of OA bring about, inevitably limits the potential for pushing the boundaries of form that working in digital spaces makes possible.

While conventional academic publishers are driven by market demands and the value of the academic book as a commodity in their decisions as to what to publish, mainstream OA publishing practices tend to be motivated by questions on how to publish a REF-able output, i.e. for all the wrong reasons. This tension between content and form, and a characteristic commitment to the latter that publishing OA makes necessary, is the central focus of my paper. As I will argue, this is perhaps the greatest paradox of OA: that in its fixation on issues of openness, it is

increasingly open only to the kinds of publications that can be effortlessly slotted into the next institutional REF submission. But, by doing so, OA publishing as we have come to know it introduces significant constraints on the forms of publication possible in academic publishing. In this paper, I consider OA as a limit to what can be published in academia today, or what I will refer to here, after Rachel Malik, as a horizon of the publishable.

‘Publishing,’ writes Malik, ‘or rather the horizon of the publishable, precedes and constitutes both what can be written and read. [...] the horizon of the publishable governs what is thinkable to publish within a particular historical moment [...] the horizon denotes [...] a boundary or limit’ (2015, 709, 720-21). Malik suggests that a number of distinct horizons can be identified and argues that the limits of all writing are based on generic conventions, i.e. crime fiction, biography, or children’s picture books, for example, are all delimited by a different set of categories and practices—by a different horizon. Her understanding of publishing foregrounds the multiplicity of processes and relations between them as well as the role of institutions: commercial, legal, educational, political, and cultural. It is the conjunction of practices and their contexts that always constitutes, according to Malik, various horizons of the publishable. For Malik, then, there is no singular concept of publishing and no single horizon but rather a multiplicity of practices and a diversity of horizons.

Open access could be added to Malik’s list as another practice defined by its unique horizon. Following Malik, it would be very easy to identify what the horizon of OA might be—what processes, practices, and institutions define and confine what can be published OA. But I would like to suggest here that thinking about OA in the context of Malik’s argument does more than offer tools for thinking about the limits of OA. I suggest that it invites a rethinking of the place of OA in publishing today and, more broadly, of the changing nature of publishing in HE. That is, I propose that today OA assumes the role of a horizon in its own right; that it defines and delimits the possibilities of what can be made public in academia. If seen as such, OA is more than just one of the practices of publishing; it has become the

horizon of the publishable in academic publishing in the UK today. The new horizon in academic publishing seems increasingly to only allow certain accepted forms of OA (such as the PDF or the postprint) which under the guise of openness, sharing and access, replicate the familiar and problematic models of our knowledge economy. The promise of OA as a response to these fixed forms of publishing seems to have given way to a peculiar openness that favours metrics and monitoring. Where OA was originally imagined to shift the perception of the established horizon, it has now become that very horizon.

Here I want to posit that we should understand poethics as a commitment to the kind of publishing that recognises the agency of the forms in which we distribute and circulate published material and acknowledges that these are always, inevitably ideological. In her notion of poethics, Joan Retallack (2003) gestures towards a writing that in form and content questions what language does and how it works—to ‘the what’ and ‘the how’ of writing. Similarly, the project of imagining OA as a poethics is an attempt at thinking about publishing that forces a reconsideration of both. However, I suggest, that with an often thoughtless and technodeterministic push towards ‘access’ and ‘openness’, ‘the what’ gets obscured at the cost of ‘the how.’ This attitude manifests itself most prominently in the proliferation of OA platforms, similar to Coventry University’s depository mentioned earlier here, that fit the parameters of REF. But platforms, as Nick Srnicek (2017) warns us, are problematic. In their design and modes of operation, they hold out the promise of freedom, openness, flexibility and entrepreneurial success, while maintaining the proprietary regimes and modes of capital accumulation that contribute to new forms of exploitation and new monopolies. The kind of publishing that mainstream OA has become (what Sarah Kember describes as a top-down, policy-driven OA)<sup>2</sup> is more akin to this platform capitalism than a publishing model which evokes the philosophy of openness and access. In a shift away from a diversity of forms of OA towards standardised OA platforms, OA has become inherently antithetical to the politics of OA publishing.

What follows, then, is that any work that takes advantage of its openness and circulation in digital spaces to experiment with 'the how' of publishing, in the current knowledge economy inevitably becomes the negative of publishable, i.e. the unpublishable. OA as platform capitalism is openly hostile to OA's poethical potential. In other words, the REF-able version of OA takes little interest in openness and delimits what is at the heart of the practice itself, i.e. what can be made open to the public (as a colleague from one of the Russell Group universities tells me, this only includes three or four-star rated publications in their case, with other works deemed not good enough to be made available via the University's website). To imagine OA as a poethical mode of publishing is to envisage a process of publishing that pushes beyond the horizon set by OA itself. It invites reading and writing of texts that might be typically thought of as unreadable, unwritable, and unpublishable.

The concept of the 'horizon' also interests Joan Retallack, who in *Poethical Wager* (2003) explores the horizon as a way of thinking about the contemporary. Retallack identifies two types of horizons: the pseudoserene horizon of time and the dynamic coastline of historical poesis (14). Reading Retallack in the context of OA, I would like to suggest that similarly two models of OA can be identified today: OA as a pseudoserene horizon and OA as a cultural coastline. One is predictable, static, and limiting, i.e. designed to satisfy the managerial class of the contemporary university; the other works towards a poethics of OA, with all its unpredictability, complexity, and openness. OA publishing which operates within the confines of the pseudoserene horizon is representative of what happens when we become complacent in the way we think about the work of publishing. Conversely, OA seen as a dynamic coastline—the model that Radical Open Access (ROA) collective works to advance—is a space where publishing is always in process and makes possible a rethinking of the experience of publishing. Seen as such, ROA is an exposition of the forms of publishing that we increasingly take for granted, and in doing so mirrors the ethos of poethics. The role of ROA, then, is to highlight the importance of searching for new models of OA, if OA is to enact its function as a swerve in attitudes towards knowledge production and consumption.

But anything new is ugly, Retallack suggests, via Picasso: 'This is always a by-product of a truly experimental aesthetics, to move into unaestheticized territory. Definitions of the beautiful are tied to previous forms' (Retallack 2003, 28). OA, as it has evolved in recent years, has not allowed the messiness of the ugly. It has not been messy enough because it has been co-opted, too quickly and unquestionably, by the agendas of the contemporary university. OA has become too 'beautiful' to enact its disruptive potential.<sup>3</sup> In its drive for legitimisation and recognition, the project of OA has been motivated by the desire to make this form of publishing too immediately familiar, and

too willingly PDF-able. The consequences of this attitude are significant. The constraints on the methods and forms of OA publishing that the institutionalisation of OA have brought about, inevitably limit the content that is published. As a result, what is delivered openly to the public is the familiar and the beautiful. The new, radical, and ugly remains out of sight; not recognised as a formal REF-able publication, the new lies beyond the horizon of the OA publication as we know it. In order to enact a poethics of openness and access, OA requires a more complex understanding of the notion of openness itself. To be truly 'open', OA publishing need not make as its sole objective a commitment to openness as a mode of making publications open for the public, i.e. circulated without a paywall, but instead should also be driven by an openness to ambiguity, experimentation, and 'a delight in complex possibility' (Retallack 2003, 221) that the dominant models of OA are unable to accommodate.

To accuse OA of fixing in place the horizon of academic publishing is to suggest that 'a certain poethics of responsibility' (Retallack 2003, 3) seems to have been lost in the bigger project of OA, responsibility to the community of writers and readers, and responsibility to the project of publishing. OA as a 'poethical attitude' (Retallack 2003, 3) rather than rampant technodeterminism, need not be a project which we have to conform to under the guidelines of the current REF, but can rather be a practice we choose to engage and engage with, under conditions that make the poethics of OA possible. What a re-thinking of OA as a poethics offers, is a way of acknowledging the need for publishing that models how we want to participate in academia. Exploring OA as a horizon of academic publishing is one possible way of addressing this challenge. Although by nature limiting, the horizon is also, Malik suggests, 'a condition of possibility' (721). The task of OA as poethics is predicated on the potential of moving away from the horizon as a boundary or a limit and towards the horizon as a possibility of experimentation and innovation. I want to conclude with another proposition, which gestures towards such rethinking of OA as a more open iteration of the horizon.

I have referred to OA publishing as a practice a number of times in this paper. A decision to use this term was a conscious attempt at framing OA as praxis. A shift away from poiesis—or making—and towards the discourse of praxis—action or doing—has been shaping the debates in the visual arts for some time now. Art seen as praxis emerges out of a desire for social life shaped by collective, transformative action. Praxis is a means of reformulating life and art into a new fusion of critical thought, creative production, and political activity. This approach grows out of Aristotle's understanding of praxis as action which is always valuable in itself, as opposed to poiesis, i.e. actions aimed at making or creation. Aristotelean praxis is always implicitly ethical—always informed by and informing decisions as to how to live—and political, concerned with forms of living with others. My understanding of OA as praxis here is informed by such thinking about ethical action as absolutely necessary for OA to enact its potential for experimentation and change.

To think about OA as praxis is to invite a conceptual shift away from making publications OA and towards 'doing OA' as a complete project. OA seen as such ceases to exist as yet another platform and emerges as an attitude that has the potential to translate into forms of publishing best suited to communicate it. This is not to suggest that OA should move away from its preoccupation with the form and medium of publishing altogether—the emergence of the so called post-medium condition in the arts, the glorification of generalised 'doing', and more recently, the popularity of related forms of 'entrepreneurship', all have their own problems. Rather, this move towards praxis is an attempt at drawing attention to a necessary relationship between making and doing, forms and attitudes, that seems to be lacking in a lot of OA publishing. OA as praxis offers a way out of what seems to be the end game of academic publishing today; it is an invitation to participate collectively and ethically in the process of making public the work of scholarship.

Doing OA—open accessing—implies a way of thinking about what producing various forms of knowledge should stand for. In other words, open accessing does not suggest a continuous

process of producing OA publications, a never-ending flow of new PDFs and platforms. Instead, open accessing is a mode of being in academia through the project of publishing as an ongoing intervention. OA as platform capitalism gives little consideration to the bigger project of OA as praxis, and as a result fails to acknowledge the significance of the relationship between the form of OA, the content published OA, and the political project that informs both. Approaching OA as praxis, then, is a tool for reshaping what constitutes the work of publishing. What a commitment to open accessing, as opposed to open access, makes possible, is a collective work against OA as a tool of the neoliberal university and for OA as a poethical form of publication: a fusion of making and doing, of OA as an attitude and OA as form. But for poethical OA to become a possibility, OA as praxis needs to emerge first.

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of the effects of similar practices of academic book sharing on publishers, see Janneke Adema, “Scanners, Collectors and Aggregators. On the ‘underground movement’ of (pirated) theory text sharing,” *Open Reflections*, 20 September 2009, <https://openreflections.wordpress.com/2009/09/20/scanners-collectors-and-aggregators-on-the-‘underground-movement’-of-pirated-theory-text-sharing/>.

<sup>2</sup> see: Sarah Kember, “Opening Out from Open Access: Writing and Publishing in Response to Neoliberalism,” *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology* 4 (2014): doi:10.7264/N31C1V51.

<sup>3</sup> see also: Janneke Adema, “Embracing Messiness: Open access offers the chance to creatively experiment with scholarly publishing,” *LSE Impact Blog*, 18 November 2014, <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2014/11/18/embracing-messiness-adema-pdsc14/>.

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# The Poethics Of Openness

Janneke Adema

Last year from the 23<sup>rd</sup> until the 29<sup>th</sup> of October the annual *Open Access Week* took place, an international advocacy event focused on open access and related topics. The theme of 2017's Open Access week was 'open in order to...', prompting participants to explore the concrete, tangible benefits of openness for scholarly communication and inviting them to reflect on how openness can make things possible. Behind this prompt, however, lies a wider discussion on whether openness is a value that is an end in itself, that is intrinsically good, or whether it predominantly has instrumental value as a means to achieve a certain end. I will focus on the latter and will start from the presumption that openness has no intrinsic value, it functions as a floating or empty signifier (Laclau 2005, 129–55; Adema 2014) with no ethics or politics of its own, only in relation to how it is applied or positioned.<sup>1</sup> It is therefore in discussions on the instrumental value of openness that our politics and ethics in relation to openness come to the fore (for example, do we value open in order to... 'grow the commons' or 'increase return on investments and contribute to economic growth'?). In this paper I want to explore ways in which openness has contributed to and advanced a specific 'end': how has it enabled experimentation with the material forms and relations that underlie and structure scholarly publishing? Here, I am thinking of both the formats (e.g. print, digital) we use to communicate our research, and the systems, roles, models and practices that have evolved around them (e.g. notions of authorship, the book and publication, publishing models). How has open access facilitated an exploration of new practices, structures and institutions, questioning the system of academic publishing as currently set up?

I won't imply here that openness is the sole or even main reason/motivator/enabler behind any kind of reimagining in this context; openness has always been part of a constellation of material-discursive factors—including most importantly perhaps, the digital, in addition to various other socio-cultural elements—which have together created (potential) conditions for change in publishing. Yet, within this constellation I would like to explore how open access, applied and valued in certain specific, e.g. radical open access, ways—where in other implementations it has actually inhibited experimentation, but I will return to that later—has been an instrumental condition for ethico-aesthetic experimentation to take place.

## Potential for Experimentation

What is clear foremost, is that the open availability of research content has been an important material condition for scholars and publishers to explore new formats and new forms of interaction around publications. In order to remix and re-use content, do large scale text and data-mining, experiment with open peer review and emerging genres such as living books, wiki-publications, versionings and multimodal adaptations, both the scholarly materials and platforms that lie at the basis of these publishing gestures strongly benefit from being open. To enable new forms of processual scholarship, communal authorship and public engagement with texts online, open access is essential; it is no surprise therefore that many of the ground-breaking experimental journals and projects in the HSS, such as *Kairos*, *Vectors* and *Inflexions*, have been purposefully open access from the start.

Yet openness as a specific practice of publishing materials online has also influenced how publishing itself is perceived. Making content openly available on blogs and personal websites, or via institutional repositories and shadow libraries, has enabled scholars to bypass legacy publishers, intermediaries and other traditional gatekeepers, to publish their research and connect to other researchers in more direct ways. This development has led to various reimaginings of the system of scholarly publishing and the roles and structures that have traditionally buttressed the publishing value chain in a print-based environment (which still predominantly echoes Robert Darnton's communication circuit, modelled on the 18<sup>th</sup> century publishing history of Voltaire's *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie* (Darnton 1982)). But next to this rethinking of the value chain, this more direct and open (self-) publishing also enabled a proliferation of new publication forms, from blogposts to podcasts and Twitter feeds.

Fuelled on by the open access movement, scholars, libraries and universities are increasingly making use of open source platforms and software such as OJS to

take the process of publishing itself back into their own hands, setting up their own formal publication outlets, from journals to presses and repositories. The open access movement has played an important role in making a case against the high profits sustaining the commercial publishing industry. This situation has created serious access issues (e.g. the monograph crisis) due to the toxic combination of market-driven publication decisions and increasingly depleted library funds, affecting the availability of specialised and niche content (Fitzpatrick 2011; Hall 2008). This frustration in particular, next to the lack of uptake of open access and multimodal publishing by the legacy presses, has motivated the rise of not-for-profit scholar- and library-led presses (Adema and Stone 2017). To that effect, open access has stimulated a new ecosystem of publishing models and communities to emerge.

Additionally, the iterative publishing of research-in-process, disseminating content and eliciting community feedback during and as part of a project's development, has strengthened a vision of publishing in which it is perceived as an integral part of the research process. The open science and notebook movements have simulated this kind of processual publishing and helped imagine a different definition of what publishing is and what purposes it fulfils. One of the more contentious arguments I want to make here is that this potential to publish our research-in-progress has strengthened our agency as scholars with respect to how and when we communicate our research. With that, our responsibility towards the specific ways in which we produce it, from the formats (digital, multi-modal, processual), to the material platforms and relations that support its production and dissemination, is further extended. Yet, on the other hand, it has also highlighted the plurality of material and discursive agencies involved in knowledge production, complicating the centrality of liberal authorial agency. The closed and fixed codex-format, the book as object, is what is being complicated and experimented with through pre- and post-publication feedback and interactions, from annotations in the margins to open peer review and communal forms of knowledge production. The publication as endpoint, as commodity, is what is being reconsidered here; but also our author-function, when, through forms of open notebook science the roles of our collaborators, of the communities involved in knowledge production, become even more visible. I would like to end this section by highlighting the ways in which mainly scholar-led projects within the open access landscape have played an important role in carving out a different (ethical) framework for publishing too, one focused on an ethics of care and communality, one in which publishing itself is perceived as a form of care, acknowledging and supporting the various agencies involved in the publishing process instead of being focused solely on its outcomes.

### Impediment to Change

The above analysis of how openness and open access more specifically has enabled experimentation, focuses mainly on how it has the potential to do so. Yet there are similarly many ways in which it has been inhibiting experimentation, further strengthening existing publishing models and established print-based formats. Think for example of how most openly available scholarly publications are either made available as PDFs or through Google Books limited preview, both mimicking closed print formats online; of how many open licences don't allow for re-use and adaptations; of how the open access movement has strategically been more committed to gratis than to libre openness; of how commercial publishers are increasingly adopting open access as just another profitable business model, retaining and further exploiting existing relations instead of disrupting them; of how new commercial intermediaries and gatekeepers parasitical on open forms of communication are mining and selling the data around our content to further their own pockets—e.g. commercial SSRNs such as Academia.edu and ResearchGate. In addition to all this, open access can do very little to further experimentation if it is met by a strong conservatism from scholars, their communities and institutions, involving fears about the integrity of scholarly content, and historical preferences for established institutions and brands, and for the printed monograph and codex format in assessment exercises—these are just a few examples of how openness does not necessarily warrant progressive change and can even effect further closures.

Openness itself does not guarantee experimentation, but openness has and can be instrumentalised in such a way as to enable experimenting to take place. It is here that I would like to introduce a new concept to think and speculate with, the concept of *poethics*. I use *poethics* in Derridean terms, as a 'nonself-identical' concept (Derrida 1973), one that is both constituted by and alters and adapts itself in intra-action with the concepts I am connecting it to here: openness and experimentation. I will posit that as a term *poethics* can

function in a connecting role as a bridging concept, outlining the speculative relationship between the two. I borrowed the concept of *poethics* (with an added h) from the poet, essayist, and scholar Joan Retallack, where it has been further taken on by the artist and critical racial and postcolonial studies scholar Denise Ferreira da Silva; but in my exploration of the term, I will also draw on the specific forms of feminist poethics developed by literary theorist Terry Threadgold. I will weave these concepts together and adapt them to start speculating what a specific *scholarly* poethics might be. I will argue in what follows that a scholarly poethics connects the *doing* of scholarship, with both its political, ethical and aesthetical elements. In this respect, I want to explore how in our engagement as scholars with openness, a specific scholarly poethics can arise, one that enables and creates conditions for the continual reimagining and reperforming of the forms and relations of knowledge production.

### A Poethics of Scholarship

Poethics is commonly perceived as the theory of ready-made textual and literary forms—it presumes structure and fixed literary objects. Threadgold juxtaposes this theory of poethics with the more dynamic concept of poiesis, the act of making or performing in language, which, she argues, better reflects and accommodates cultural and semiotic processes and with that the writing process itself (Threadgold 1997, 3). For Threadgold, feminist writings in particular have examined this concept of poiesis, rather than poethics, of textuality by focusing on the process of text creation and the multiple identities and positions from which meaning is derived. This is especially visible in forms of feminist *rewriting*, e.g. of patriarchal knowledges, theories and narratives, which ‘reveal their gaps and fissures and the binary logic which structures them’ (Threadgold 1997, 16). A poethics of rewriting then goes beyond a passive analysis of texts as autonomous artefacts, where the engagement with and appraisal of a text is actively performed, becoming performative, becoming itself a poiesis, a making; the ‘analyst’ is embodied, becoming part of the complex socio-cultural context of meaning-making

(Threadgold 1997, 85). Yet Threadgold emphasises that both terms complement and denote each other, they are two sides of the same coin; poethics forms the necessary static counterpoint to the dynamism of poiesis.

Joan Retallack moves beyond any opposition of poethics and poiesis in her work, bringing them together in her concept of *poethics*, which captures the responsibility that comes with the formulating and performing of a poethics. This, Retallack points out, always involves a wager, a staking of something that matters on an uncertain outcome—what Mouffe and Laclau have described as taking a decision in an undecidable terrain (Mouffe 2013, 15). For Retallack a poethical attitude thus necessarily comes with the ‘courage of the swerve’, where, ‘swerves (like antiromantic modernisms, the civil rights movement, feminism, postcolonialist critiques) are necessary to dislodge us from reactionary allegiances and nostalgias’ (Retallack 2004, 3). In other words, they allow change to take place in already determined situations. A poethics of the swerve, of change, thus continuously unsettles our familiar routes and notions; it is a poethics of conscious risk, of letting go of control, of placing our inherited conceptions of ethics and politics at risk, and of questioning them, experimenting with them. For Retallack taking such a wager as a writer or an artist, is necessary to connect our aesthetic registers to the ‘character of our time’, acknowledging the complexities and changing qualities of life and the world. Retallack initially coined the term poethics to characterise John Cage’s aesthetic framework, seeing it as focused on ‘making art that models how we want to live’ (Retallack 2004, 44). The principle of poethics then implies a practice in which ethics and aesthetics can come together to reflect upon and perform life’s changing experiences, whilst insisting upon our responsibility (in interaction with the world) to guide this change the best way we can, and to keep it in motion.

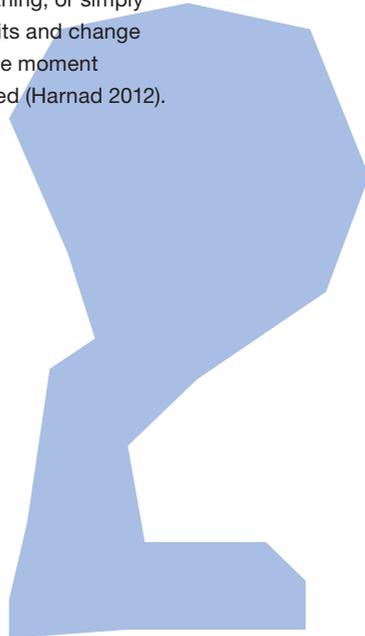
Denise Ferreira da Silva takes the concept of poethics further to consider a new kind of speculative thinking—a black feminist poethics—which rejects the linear and rational, one-dimensional thought that characterises Western

European philosophy and theory in favour of a fractal or four-dimensional thinking, which better captures the complexity of our world. Complicating linear conceptions of history and memory as being reductive, Ferreira da Silva emphasises how they are active elements, actively performing our past, present and future. As such, she points out how slavery and colonialism, often misconstrued in linear thinking as bygone remnants of our past, are actively performed in and through our present, grounded in that past, a past foundational to our consciousness. Using fractal thinking as a poethical tool, Ferreira da Silva hopes to break through the formalisations of linear thought, by mapping blackness, and modes of colonialism and racial violence not only on time, but on various forms of space and place, exploring them explicitly from a four-dimensional perspective (Bradley 2016). As such, she explains, poethical thinking, 'deployed as a creative (fractal) imaging to address colonial and racial subjugation, aims to interrupt the repetition characteristic of fractal patterns' (Ferreira da Silva 2016) and refuses 'to reduce what exists—anyone and everything—to the register of the object, the other, and the commodity' (Ferreira da Silva 2014).

These three different but complementary perspectives from the point of view of literary scholarship and practice, albeit themselves specific and contextual, map well onto what I would perceive a 'scholarly poethics' to be: a form of *doing* scholarship that pays specific attention to the relation between context and content, ethics and aesthetics; between the methods and theories informing our scholarship and the media formats and graphic spaces we communicate through. It involves scholars taking responsibility for the practices and systems they are part of and often uncritically repeat, but also for the potential they have to perform them differently; to take risks, to take a wager on exploring other communication forms and practices, or on a thinking that breaks through formalisations of thought. Especially if as part of our intra-actions with the world and today's society we can better reflect and perform its complexities. A scholarly poethics, conceptualised as such, would include forms of openness that do not simply repeat either established forms

(such as the closed print-based book, single authorship, linear thought, copyright, exploitative publishing relationships) or succumb to the closures that its own implementation (e.g. through commercial adaptations) and institutionalisation (e.g. as part of top-down policy mandates) of necessity also implies and brings with it. It involves an awareness that publishing in an open way directly impacts on what research is, what authorship is, and with that what publishing is. It asks us to take responsibility for how we engage with open access, to take a position in towards it—towards publishing more broadly—and towards the goals we want it to serve (which I and others have done through the concept and project of radical open access, for example). Through open publishing we *can* take in a critical position, and we *can* explore new formats, practices and institutions, we just have to risk it.

<sup>1</sup> This doesn't mean that as part of discussions on openness and open access, openness has not often been perceived as an intrinsic good, something we want to achieve exactly because it is perceived as an a priori good in itself, an ideal to strive for in opposition to closedness (Tkacz 2014). A variant of this also exists, where openness is simply perceived as 'good' because it opens up access to information, without further exploring or considering why this is necessarily a good thing, or simply assuming that other benefits and change will derive from there, at the moment universal access is achieved (Harnad 2012).

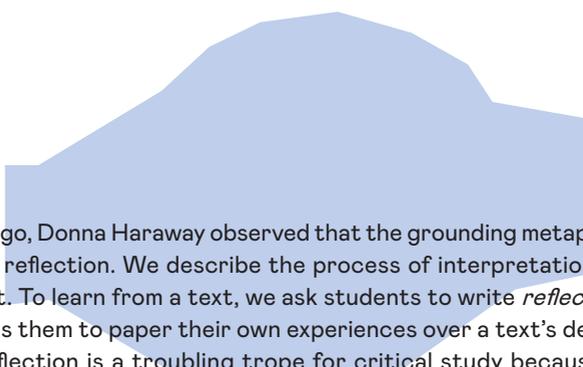


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## Diffraction Publishing

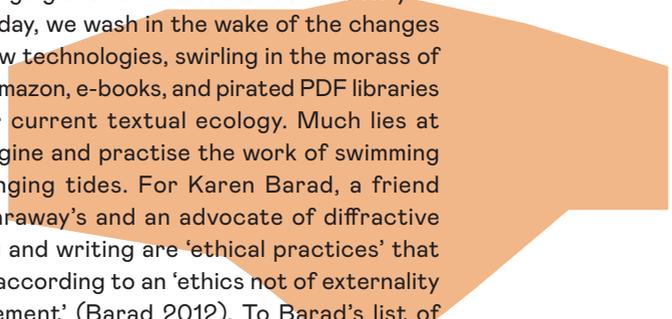
Frances  
McDonald  
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Over a quarter century ago, Donna Haraway observed that the grounding metaphor for humanistic inquiry is reflection. We describe the process of interpretation as *reflecting upon* an object. To learn from a text, we ask students to write *reflection pieces*, which encourages them to paper their own experiences over a text's dense weave. For Haraway, reflection is a troubling trope for critical study because it 'displaces the same elsewhere'—that is, it conceives of reading and writing as exercises in self-actualisation, with the text serving as a mirrored surface upon which the scholar might see her own reflection cast back at her, *mise en abyme*. 'Reflexivity has been much recommended as a critical practice,' she writes, 'but my suspicion is that reflexivity, like reflection, only displaces the same elsewhere, setting up the worries about copy and original and the search for the authentic and really real' (Haraway 1997, 16).

Haraway's 'regenerative project'—which now extends far beyond her early work—has been to craft a critical consciousness based on a different optical metaphor: diffraction. In physics, a diffraction pattern is the bending of waves, especially light and sound waves, around obstacles and through apertures. It is, Haraway writes, 'the production of difference patterns in the world, not just of the same reflected—displaced—elsewhere' (268). If reflective reading forever inscribes the reader's identity onto whatever text she touches, then diffractive reading sees the intimate touching of text and reader as a contingent, dynamic unfolding of mutually transformative affinities. To engage diffractively with an idea is to become

*entangled* with it—a verb rooted in the Old Norse word for seaweed, *thongull*, that undulating biomass that ensnares and is ensnared by oars and fishing nets; by hydrophones and deep-sea internet cables; by coral and other forms of marine life. Adapting another fragment from Haraway, we ask: 'What forms of life survive and flourish in these dense, imploded zones?' (Haraway 1994, 62).



This question remains not only relevant but is today increasingly urgent. When Haraway began writing about diffraction in the late 80s and early 90s, the web was nascent; it would be several years before Mozilla would launch its Mosaic browser, bringing the full throttle of connectivity to a broader public. Today, we wash in the wake of the changes brought by these new technologies, swirling in the morass of social media, email, Amazon, e-books, and pirated PDF libraries that constitute our current textual ecology. Much lies at stake in how we imagine and practise the work of swimming through these changing tides. For Karen Barad, a friend and colleague of Haraway's and an advocate of diffractive scholarship, reading and writing are 'ethical practices' that must be reimagined according to an 'ethics not of externality but rather entanglement' (Barad 2012). To Barad's list of reading and writing we here add publishing. If entanglement has an ethics, then it behooves us as scholars to not just describe and debate it but to transform materially the ways we see ourselves as reading and writing together. Adding our voices to a rising chorus that includes Janneke Adema (2015), Kathleen Fitzpatrick (2018), Eileen Joy (2017), Sarah Kember (2016), Tara McPherson (2018), Gary Hall (2016), Iris van der Tuin (2014), and others working at the intersection of digital humanities, scholarly publishing, and feminist methodologies, we ask: how can we build scholarly infrastructures that foster diffractive reading and writing? What kind of publishing model might be best suited to expressing and emboldening diffractive practices? These are big questions that must be collectively addressed; in this short piece, we offer our own experiences designing *thresholds*, an experimental digital zine, as one potential model for digital publishing that is attuned to the ethics of entanglement.

\* \* \*

*handwritten sticky notes, highlighted document pages, and grainy photographs rub against one another, forming dense and shifting thickets. the blank spaces between once-distinct districts become cluttered and close. geographically distant realms ache to converge. the bookcase furiously semaphores toward the far corner of the room. thin lines of coloured paper arrive to splay across sections. the wall bursts at every seam.*

Whether it be real or virtual, every research project has its own 'wall': a 'dense, imploded zone' that is populated by the ideas, images, scenes, and sentences that 'stick' to us, to use Lara Farina's evocative phrase (2014, 33). They are the 'encounters' that Gilles Deleuze describes as the impetus toward work, the things that 'strike' us, as Walter Benjamin puts it, like a hammer to unknown inner chords. Although instrumental to every humanities project, this entangled web of texts and ideas has a brutally short lifespan. The writer strives to reassert control by whittling down its massy excesses; indeed, training to be a scholar in the humanities is in large part learning to compress and contain the wall's licentious sprawl. We shorten our focus to a single period, place, or author, excise those fragments that fall outside the increasingly narrow range of our expertise, and briskly sever any loose ends that refuse to be tied. These regulatory measures help align our work with the temporal, geographic, and aesthetic boundaries of our disciplinary arbiters: the journals and university presses that publish our work, the departments that hire and tenure us. In an increasingly tight academic marketplace, where the qualified scholars, articles, and projects far outnumber the available positions, deviation from the standard model can seem like risky business indeed.

The institutional imperatives of compression and containment not only dictate the structural parameters of a work—its scope and trajectory—but the very texture of our writing. In a bid to render academic texts more comprehensible to their readers, modern style guides advocate plain prose. Leanness, they remind us, is legibility. This aversion to ornament was part of a larger mutiny against the scourge of obfuscation that plagued the humanities in the latter half of the twentieth century. Between 1995 and 1998, the journal *Philosophy and Literature* ran a Bad Writing Contest that took this turgid academic prose as its target, and cheerfully skewered the work

of such distinguished critics as Judith Butler, Homi Bhabha, and Fredric Jameson for their long-winded impenetrability. Unlike its prizewinning paragraphs, the Contest's message was clear: the opaque abstractions that clogged the arteries of academic writing were no longer to be tolerated.

The academy's stylistic strip-down has served to puncture the unseemly bloat that had disfigured its prose. But its sweeping injunction against incomprehensibility bears with it other casualties. As we slim and trim our texts, cutting any tangents that distract from the argument's main thrust, we unwittingly excise writing's other gaits—those twists, roils, and scintillating leaps that Eric Hayot, in his recent rejoinder to academic style guides, so beautifully describes as 'gyrations in prose' (2014, 58). For Hayot, these stylistic excesses occur when an author's passion for her subject becomes so overwhelming that it can no longer be expressed plainly. The kinetic energy of these gyrations recalls the dynamism of the wall; one may glimpse its digressiveness in the meandering aside, its piecemeal architecture in the sentence fragment, or its vaulting span in the photo quote. These snags in intelligibility are not evidence of an elitist desire to exclude, but are precisely the moments in which the decorous surface of a text cracks open to offer a glimpse of the tangled expanses beneath. To experience them as such, the reader must sacrifice her grip on a text's argument and allow herself to be swept up in the muddy momentum of its dance. Caught amidst a piece's movements, the reader trades intellectual insight for precarious intimacy, the ungraspable streaming of one into another.

By polishing over these openings under the edict of legibility, plain prose breeds a restrictive form of plain reading, in which the reader's role is to digest discrete parcels of information, rather than move and be moved along with the rollicking contours of a work. At stake in advocating for a plurality of readerly and writerly practices is an ethics of criticism. The institutional apparatuses that shape our critical practices instruct us to erase all traces of the serendipitous gyrations that constitute our writing and reading, and erect in their place

a set of boundaries that keep our work in check. Yet our habits of critical inquiry are irrefutably subjective and collaborative. In an effort to move toward such a methodology, we might ask: What forms of scholarship and knowledge become possible when we reconceive of the spaces between readers, writers, and texts as thresholds rather than boundaries, that is, as contiguous zones of entanglement? How would our critical apparatus mutate if we ascribed value to the shifting sprawl of the wall and make public the diffractive processes that constitute our writing and reading practices?

To put these questions into action, we have created *thresholds* (<http://openthresholds.org>). We solicit work that a traditional academic journal may deem unfinished, unseemly, or otherwise unbound, but which discovers precisely in its unboundedness new and oblique perspectives on art, culture, history, and philosophy. Along with her piece, the author also submits the fragments that provoked and surreptitiously steered her work. We the editors then collaborate closely with the author to custom-design these pieces for the platform's split screen architecture. The result is a more open-ended, process-oriented webtext that blooms from, but never fully leaves, the provocative juxtapositions of the author's wall.

The split screen design aligns *thresholds* with a long history of media that splits content and divides the gaze. In film, the split screen has long been used to splice together scenes that are temporally or spatially discontinuous. This divided frame disrupts the illusion that the camera provides a direct feed of information and so reveals film to be an authored and infinitely interpretable object, each scene refracted through others. The split screen developed under a different name in HTML: the frame element. Now considered a contrivance due to its overuse in the late 90s, Netscape Navigator's development of the frameset nonetheless marked a major development in the history of the web. For the first time, designers could load multiple documents in a single visual field, each with their own independent actions and scrolling.

Of course, both the cinematic split screen and the HTML frameset gesture towards a much older material threshold: the gutter that divides the pages of the codex. Since most of its content is presented and read linearly, we rarely consider the book as a split form. However, many writers and poets have played with the gutter as a signifying space. In *Un coup de dés*, a late nineteenth-century poem that inspired much continental theory and philosophy in the latter half of the twentieth century, Stéphane Mallarmé famously uses each two-page spread to rhetorical effect, jumping and twirling the reader's eye around and across the gutter. Blaise Cendrars and Sonia Delaunay in their self-published avant-garde artist's book *La Prose du Transsiberien* (1913) similarly create a 'simultaneous' aesthetic that pairs image and text through an accordion fold. These early instances have more recent cousins in the textile art of Eve Sedgwick, the extraordinary visual poetry of Claudia Rankine's *Citizen*, and the work of artists like Fred Hagstrom and Heather Weston, whose multidimensional books spur new ways of looking at and thinking about texts.

Drawing inspiration from these exemplars, *thresholds* brings the creative affordances of the split screen to the web, and to scholarship. Think of it as an artist's browser that hearkens back to the early web; or imagine in its recto/verso design a speculative future for the post-digital book. Here, the eye not only flows along (with) the split screen's vertical scroll, but also cuts distinctive lateral lines between each piece as the reader bends left and right through an issue, one half-screen at a time. How the reader decides to characterize each threshold—and how the writer and editors collaboratively design it—determines the interpretive freight its traversal can bear. In their poem 'Extraneous,' published in the first issue, Charles Bernstein and Ted Greenwald treat it as a lens through which their collaboratively authored text passes, darkly. What emerges on the other side is an echo of the original, where language, newly daubed in hot swaths of colour, takes on the acoustic materiality of a riotous chorus. In 'Gesture of Photographing,' another collaboratively-authored piece, Carla Nappi and Dominic Pettman use the threshold to diffract the work of Vilem Flusser. Each sink into his words on

photography and emerge having penned a short creative work that responds to yet pushes away from his ideas.

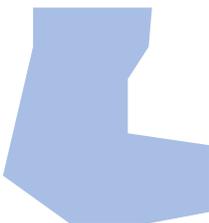
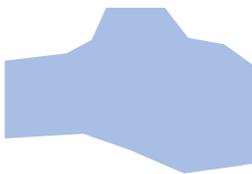
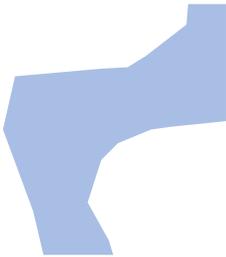
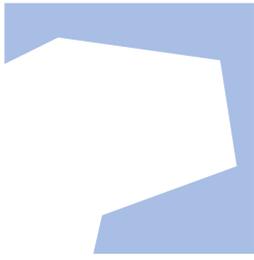
As the reader navigates horizontally through an issue, twisting and bumping from theory to fiction to image to sound, *thresholds* invites her to engage with reading and writing as a way of making waves of difference in the world. That is, the platform does not divide each contribution taxonomically but rather produces an entangled line of juxtapositions and ripples, producing what Haraway calls 'worldly interference patterns' (Haraway 1994, 60). There is a place, *thresholds* implicitly argues, for the fragmentary in our collecting and collective practices; for opacity and disorientation; for the wall's sprawl within the more regimented systems that order our work.

To reach this place, criticism might begin at the threshold. The threshold is the zone of entanglement that lies betwixt and between writing and reading, text and reader, and between texts themselves. It is restless and unruly, its dimensions under perpetual renegotiation. To begin here requires that we acknowledge that criticism does not rest on solid ground; it too is a restless and unruly set of practices given to proliferation and digression. To begin here is to enter into a set of generative traversals that forge fragments into new relations that in turn push against the given limits of our inherited architectures of knowledge. To begin here is to relinquish the fantasy that a text or texts may ever be fully, finally known, and reconceive of our work as a series of partial engagements and affective encounters that participate in texts' constant remaking.

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The  
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