Disturbing the Wednesday-ish Business-as-Usual of the University Studium: A Wayzgoose Manifest

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This time it is not I who seek it out [...] it is the element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me. A Latin word exists to designate this wound, this prick, this mark made by a pointed instrument [...] This element which will disturb the studium [...] call punctum; for punctum is also: sting, speck, cut, little hole—and also a cast of the dice.

—Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida

What enables us to risk change is the feeling that we are understood and (therefore) accompanied.

—L.O. Aranye Fradenburg, “Living Chaucer”

Professional Challenges. Amateur Solutions.

—Motto of the Bruce High Quality Foundation

In a short piece in The Chronicle of Higher Education, “Ditch the Monograph,” Jennifer Howard surveys some recent experiments by university presses to cultivate and produce shorter-form e-books (i.e., Princeton Shorts and Stanford Briefs),¹ and wonders if these books might not “pull in new readers for serious scholarship,” and at a time, moreover, when “academic libraries have ever-smaller amounts of money and space to lavish on [longer] books, which often have more

pages than they have readers.” Paul Harvey, the new director of Stanford University Press, explains that these books will be “accessible but not simplified, and should be digestible in one or two sessions—bite-sized—and not require a month of reading.” At the same time, we are witnessing the launching of new academic publishing initiatives, such as Anvil Academic, a platform for “born-digital” and “born-again-digital” “post-monograph” (non-book) research that is pinning its hopes for the future of academic publishing on networked and “digital-only” environments that would “free scholarly argument from the limitations of the printed monograph and allow authors to bring the full force of technology to the presentation of their work.” It appears important to the academic collective at Anvil to continue to maintain and ensure certain protocols of peer review, but in ways that are “better suited to networked environments.” Conversely, Zero Books (an imprint of John Hunt Publishing, Ltd.), one of the more radical and exciting academic imprints out there today, is offering shorter-form books that are very much still books in print as well as available in e-book formats. In their mission statement, Zero inveighs (in somewhat hysterical tones) that a “cretinous anti-intellectualism presides” over a contemporary culture, “cheerled by hacks in the pay of multinational corporations,” and thus the time is ripe for a different set of discourses—“intellectual without being academic, popular without being populist”—and while Zero Books, indeed, offers a particularly electric and eclectic list of reasonably-priced, shorter-form books (Slime Dynamics, Nuclear Futurism, and Levitate the Primate are just a few samples of their bracing titles), they do not offer any of their publications in open-access form. Thus, their desire for a reinvigorated and non-bland, non-

3. “‘Bite-sized’ Reading from SUP.”
4. “About Anvil Academic,” Anvil Academic, http://anvilacademic.org/about-anvil-academic/. See also Adeline Koh’s interview with the head editor of Anvil, Fred Moody: “A Digital Solution to Academic Publishing? Introducing Anvil Academic,” Profl Hacker [Chronicle of Higher Education weblog], September 24, 2012, http://chronicle.com/blogs/profhacker/a-digital-solution-to-academic-publishing-introducing-anvil-academic/42828. I will note here that Anvil was conceptualized and is managed by a consortium of institutions (such as the Council on Library and Information Resources [CLIR], the National Institute for Technology in Library Education [NITLE], and University of Michigan Library’s MPublishing office, which is also partnered with Open Humanities Press), university scholars, and academic librarians, and is partly funded by various universities with an intense interest in the digital humanities (such as the University of Virginia, Washington University in Saint Louis, and Stanford University, among others). Anvil appears to not have fully made up its mind whether or not it would offer services to those who might want to publish monographs (whether longer or shorter), edited collections, and journals in digital form (at times, in their various statements, they seem to be saying analog-style digital publishing is passé and not their focus, and at others, that they would welcome helping academics with digital platforms for e-versions of academic monographs, etc.). What does appear clear is that one of their chief motivating impetuses and concerns seems to be ensuring the maintenance of traditional forms of expert peer review, albeit within newly innovative digital publishing environments, and yet, at the same time, what is not clear from their website or published pieces on their project is exactly how (or what) they plan to offer in the way of technical infrastructures, platforms, and ongoing support for those new (and increasingly networked) environments.
consensual sphere of public intellectual debate is still somewhat in the shadow of the multinational corporations (such as Amazon.com, to which all of their book pages link) that their mission statement scorns.\(^5\)

While watching the fat of our wayzgoose congeal in the wood-grains of the table in our communal vagabond printer’s workshop, and while bathed in the autumnal light of the raining Gutenberg-era photons to which Isaac Linder has called our attention,\(^6\) I share this admittedly woefully brief and selective overview of current trends in academic publishing initiatives simply to highlight their austerity (or, perhaps, their pragmatism) of imagination as well as their “heavy” managerial structures.\(^7\) For even while I applaud the initiative of these initiatives (and I plan to support them with my voice and wallet, being a pluralist, after all), I also despair a little at the ways in which they are each, in their own way, also locked into institutional structures (whether corporate, academic, or even ideological) that determine in advance what is and isn’t (supposedly) possible and what is (supposedly) necessary now — such that, for example, the monograph is now “out” and shorter books (or serialized e-extracts from longer works) are “in,” e-texts are more desirable (and supposedly cheaper to produce and disseminate) than traditional print media, it is necessary to shift (and even dispense with) certain publishing modes to meet the demands of currently popular text-delivery technologies (such as iPads, Kindles,

5. “About Us,” Zero Books, http://www.zero-books.net/about-us.html?i=9. Zero Books is a subsidiary of John Hunt Publishing, Ltd., a trade publisher based in the UK, known especially for the books it has published in the genres of spirituality or “New Age” studies (through its O-Books, Dodona, Mantra Books, Moon Books, Soul Rocks, and Circle Books imprints) and also in the genres of parapsychology, esoteric and mystic knowledges, holistic health, juvenile fiction, and erotica, among other subjects. While Zero Books is a welcome imprint in the multiverse of what might be called “radicalized” para-academic publishing, it appears to offer practically no close editorial support to its authors. Why I bother to mention this at all will be more apparent as my little wayzgoose diatribe here gathers more steam. Let it be said, however, that I have regularly purchased titles from this imprint because they are publishing authors whose work I admire (Rob Coley and Dean Lockwood, Mark Fisher, Graham Harman, Steven Shaviro, Eugene Thacker, Ben Woodard, to name some but not all), even while I find Zer0’s editorial oversight, such as it is, appallingly uneven.

6. “‘Bite-sized’ Reading from SUP.”

7. I would note here that I am in deep admiration of the work of Open Humanities Press (http://openhumanitiespress.org/), and am especially keen on their experimental writing + publishing modes as evidenced in their Living Books About Life series (http://www.livingbooksaboutlife.org/) and Liquid Books imprint (http://liquidbooks.pbworks.com/w/page/11135951/FrontPage), edited by Clare Birchall and Gary Hall, as well as in some of their journals, such as Vectors (http://www.vectorsjournal.org/issues/index.php?issue=6). From my vantage point, OHP has been consistent in thinking “outside the box” of traditional university and commercial academic publishing and they have published some of the most radical new thinking in the humanities (albeit somewhat slowly), but they cannot be viewed as completely “independent” of the university milieu from which all of their Editorial and Open-Access Board members, as well as the members of their Steering Group and Partners, hail. I simply seek a more radical, even anti-peer departure out of the academy for so-called “academic” publishing, while at the same time I support the idea of the university as one place among others where more radical publishing modes might be cultivated (as is the case with Anvil, OHP, Stanford Shorts, etc.), more on which below.
and smart-phones), expert and specialist peer review is still necessary for “legitimacy,” multiple
layers of hierarchical and bureaucratic academic-managerial oversight still obtain while at the
same time certain layers of important editorial care and curatorship drop away (due to lack of
time, money, staff, readers’ attention spans, space, etc.), the material archive (the dream of
Borges’s Babelasian library or even Richard Fenyman’s 24 million library volumes etched on
the head of a pin) should simply be abandoned, and so on. Being among friends in the glow of
the para-academic Outside, I will dispense with the posture of academic politesse, and attempt
to say what I really feel: if a radically innovative and public cultural-intellectual milieu is to
flourish, and if we are to imagine and hope for future Walter Benjamins who will still attempt to
cross borders with manuscripts in briefcases that are more important to them than their very
own persons, then what we need now is more (more papers, briefcases, Kindles, iPads, filing
 cabinets, shelves, teletype machines, Linux code, microchips, mimeographs, lithium batteries,
candles, pens, javascripts, and so on) and not less of everything (we need print books as well as
e-texts, yellow legal pads as well as the mystic writing pads of our Evernote apps, baroquely
lengthy multi-volume works as well as broadsides and post-it note scholarship, close and
loving and even co-dependent editorial curatorship of others’ work, and so on). We need to
multiply and also invent new trade routes and modes of exchange for disseminating intellectual
work—going for baroque, or broke—and we also need the courage (or foolishness) to depart
to extra-territories not bathed in the harsh fluorescent lighting of the academy “proper.”

The university will continue to be an important site for keeping open the question of thought and
for fostering various modes of thought dissemination, but I also think it’s time for a subter-
fugitive, vagabond, gypsy para-humanities, especially at a time when so many of us are barely
hanging on to the university by the skin of our teeth (or hands or minds). Let’s “get lost” now,
taking the humanities with us like so many suitcases, portable libraries, and sacks of
contraband diamonds. Let’s figure out inventive ways to radicalize (and thus sustain) the
humanities by absconding with them to the streets, alleys, market squares, ateliers, lounges,
coffee shops, bookstores, sofas, wine bars, clubs, kitchens, bedrooms, galleries, dive bars,
park benches, garages, living rooms, deserted urban zones, and crumbling basements.

8. See Richard Fenyman, “There’s Plenty of Room at the Bottom,” Engineering and Science 23.5 (February 1960):
10. Here, as always, I defer to Bill Readings, The University in Ruins (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press,
1996). An important, more recent companion to Readings’ book is Christopher Newfield, Unmaking the Public
University: The Forty-Year Assault on the Middle Class (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).
11. I’m thinking here especially of all the post-grads with no, or contingent, jobs, the adjunct teaching staff, but
also those who, for various reasons (including economic constraints), have been cut off or distanced from
university life, who hope that they can play a role in intellectual “life,” but who feel increasingly unable to participate.
12. And here I would also pause to praise para-academic educational initiatives and organizations, such as The
Public School New York (http://thepublicschool.org/nyc), The Saxifrage School (http://saxifrageschool.org/), The
Vancouver Institute for Social Research (http://www.facebook.com/events/495903313795700/), The Art School in
short, let’s re-boot, let’s situate ourselves, like Diogenes on the outskirts of Athens, on the
edges of our cities and towns, never losing sight of the places (and institutions) we care about,
while also saying, fuck this. Let’s embrace a radical, polyglot cosmopolitanism that enunciates a
“shaggy heart,” where we will have “no fixed abode” and be “nowhere a foreigner.” Like
practitioners of Hakim Bey’s amour fou, we should strive to be “illegal” now, “saturating”
ourselves with our own aesthetic, engaging in publishing ventures that would fill themselves “to
the borders” with “the trajectories of [their] own gestures,” running “on angels’ clocks,” our only
goal the “ingestion of the Galaxy,” and never tilting at fates fit only for “commissars &
shopkeepers.” One of the things we have lost sight of in the university, and especially in our
publishing practices, is the importance of play—now is the time, again cadging from Hakim
Bey, to “share the mischievous destiny” of runaways, “to meet only as wild children might,
locking gazes across a dinner table while adults gibber from behind their masks.” Without
non-utilitarian play, and without the right to flail, flounder, and fail while playing, we risk the frigid
stasis of the status quo, of always being trapped in what has already been said, what has
already been played out. How did we get here? How did the creative arts get so thoroughly de-
cathcted from the “liberal” arts? How will we give birth to heretic-misfit love-child thoughts
without unbridled play?

So much for ontologically anarchic poetics and Bey’s wild children and crazy love: what
about practicalities? Fuck practicality; this ain’t practical. For me, the most exciting publishing
and dissemination ventures going are those such as continent., Speculations, Iteration,
Anarchist Developments in Cultural Studies, the Organism for Poetic Research (OPR) and its
publication PELT, Uitgeverij Press, eth press: postmedieval poetics, the Hollow Earth Society,
the Bruce High Quality Foundation, the Confraternity of Neoflagellants, and so on—journals,
presses, and alternative research-cultural organizations entirely run and managed by graduate

140.
16. On the importance of artful play to the humanities as well as to well-being, see L.O. Aranyte Fradenburg,
are crucial to the becomings of living creatures, to adaptation and behavioral flexibility; . . . it is transformative and
transforming. We can neither thrive nor survive without it” (57). See also Aranyte Fradenburg, “Frontline: The Liberal
Arts of Psychoanalysis,” Journal of the American Academy of Psychoanalysis and Dynamic Psychiatry 39.4
17. See Speculations: A Journal of Speculative Realism (http://www.speculations-journal.org/), Iteration: Cross-
Disciplinary Studies in Rhetoric, Media, and Culture (http://iteration.org/), Anarchist Developments in Cultural
students and post-graduates (and some faculty collaborators) with no financial support to
speak of and only tenuous footholds in the university (our academic precariat) and who are
publishing or fostering some of the most exciting work in the humanities and arts right now,
work that eschews and also troubles the waters of disciplinary genre, “review,” privilege, and
status. It is one of the aims of punctum books to assist these and other new (extra- but also
para-institutional) publishing initiatives with various forms of regular and longer-term support
(economic, editorial, aesthetic, technical, promotional, etc.), but who is paying for this? No one;
at least, no one “official.” We’ve simply scraped together what we have; we’re running on the
steam of an international all-volunteer staff and gift-share economies, also martinis, WD-40,
loose change, old Talking Heads albums, matches, a glitter ball, and chewing gum. And yet, we
actually believe that an open-access and print-on-demand model (in which all of our
publications are both free and available for purchase) may actually lead to something like
financial solvency and even jobs, but we’re not making that a condition of our future plans. We
aim to grow through a vast network of talented persons (some situated in universities and
cultural institutions with paying jobs, some not) dedicated to a radically independent publishing
ventures that would not be beholden to any specific university or commercial academic
interest, and to fostering the broadest possible range of open-access print- and e-based
platforms for the sustenance of what we are calling a “whimsical para-humanities
assemble” — an assemble, moreover, that refuses to relinquish any possible form of
public-ation (the making of cultural-intellectual stealth “publics” that would seep in and out of
institutional and non-institutional spaces, hopefully blurring the boundaries between “inside”
and “outside”: an ultimate fog machine), and we are also intent on resuscitating what we are
calling postmedieval and pastmodern forms of publication (from breviation and commentary and
florilegium to telegram and liner notes and inter-office memo, from the Book of Hours to the
cassette mixtape).

The term “para-academic” was devised by Nicola Masciandaro, one of punctum’s founders,
to capture

the multivalent sense of something that fulfills and/or frustrates the academic
from a position of intimate exteriority. Para-academia is that which is beside
academia, a place whose logic encompasses many reasons and no reason at all (para-,
“alongside, beyond, altered, contrary,” from Greek para-, “beside,

Studies (http://anarchist-developments.org/index.php/adcs/about), Organism for Poetic Research and PELT
(http://organismforpoeticresearch.org/), Uitgeverij Press (http://www.uitgeverij.cc/), eth press: postmedieval
poeties (http://ethpress.com/), Hollow Earth Society (http://hollowearthsociety.com/), Bruce High Quality
Foundation (http://www.thebrucehighqualityfoundation.com/Site/home.html), and the Confraternity of

18. Or as Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei put it during our BABEL Waygoose session, “Fuck peer review.” And as
Vincent also puts it in one of the five maxims for his press, Uitgeverij (meaning simply, “Publisher”), “Only
experiment can present the present. We only care about the new, whether past, present, or future. We enjoy
publishing anything that’s between categories, obscure, or witnessing the edges of language. For us, all audience
is potential” (see footnote 17 for Uitgeverij’s website address, where you will find all five maxims in a variety of
different languages).
near, from, against, contrary to," cognate with Sanskrit para-, “beyond”). The 
para is the domain of: shadow, paradigm, daemon, parasite, supplement, 
amateur, elite. The para-academic embodies an unofficial excess or extension 
of the academic that helps, threatens, supports, mocks (par-ody), perfects 
and/or calls it into question simply by existing next to it.19

This accords well, I think, with some of the sentiments expressed by the editors of continent. 
and Speculations during an online conversation they conducted with each other on the 
“aesthetics of (para)academic practice,” where Michael Austin wanted to distinguish between 
academia and the university—“I take academia to be the culture of knowledge-communication, 
while the university happens to be the most notable site of such communication in present 
society. There is no necessary connection between the two, nor should we assume academia 
requires the university in order to exist”—and Paul Boshears added this important 
exemplification of Austin’s comments: “Both Academia and the University are imagined 
communities, to borrow Benedict Anderson’s phrase. However, the University is an institution 
that accredits, controls, and stamps the passports of those that would enter its territory. It is a 
striated space as opposed to Academia’s [more] fluid space.”20

It is punctum’s aim to occupy this more fluid space but to also de-territorialize the University 
itself, disturbing and disrupting the Wednesday-ish, business-as-usual protocols of both the 
generic university studium and its individual cells and holding tanks, while also extending the 
very important work of the University into new and often untended spaces. Because our press 
was founded and is directed by premodernists (medievalists and early modernists),21 we have 
some serious love of the book as a material art object, we believe in material scriptoriums and 
libraries, and we also embrace the idea of the itinerant and also the cloistered scholar. We also 
imagine that printed matter might be of some use during and after our own pre- and post-
apocalyptic “Age(s) of Simplification,” while we are also intent on making use of whatever 
“generators of electrical essences” we can get our hands on.22 We want it all, and we’re not 
inclined to ask for permission to “pretty, please” let us publish whatever it is we want to publish. 
In this sense, we are also impatiently presentist: we want things now, as opposed to later and if 
we make mistakes, if we speak (or publish) too soon, too hastily, we’ll depend on what Kathleen 
Fitzpatrick has termed post-publication review23 to sort that out. What we need now is more,

or BOTH?” punctum books [weblog], February 20, 2012, http://punctumbooks.com/blog/party-or-is-it-a-panel-
discussion-on-para-academic-publishing-or-both/.
21. But is it important to note here that punctum books aims to publish books and other types of texts across a 
wide range of fields and disciplines, and our Advisory Board is made up of scholars and artists who work on 
diverse subjects, from political science to architecture to feminist philosophy to metal theory to new media studies 
to art history and beyond.
23. See Kathleen Fitzpatrick, “Peer Review,” in Kathleen Fitzpatrick, Planned Obsolescence: Publishing, 
and not less, thought, with more words, ruly and unruly, jostling with each other across the pages and liquid retina displays of our dispersed yet still extimate “commons.” This is not to say that punctum books does not care about the quality of the work it publishes (we wouldn’t publish just anything but we would certainly publish almost anything if it were interesting enough and well-written and if it appears to take seriously what we say we are looking to “pimp”: “writing as risk, adventure, a going-forth without ‘papers’ or guarantees: falling through the hole/punctum, a falling down, freefall […] quixotic, sagely mad engagements that generate and satisfy noetic-erotic need, textual thought-bodies that give pleasures only to be possessed in their presence”). Nor is this to say that we do not lavish close and creative attention upon the editing, formatting, and creative design of our publications (indeed, we want to distinguish ourselves in this manner from university and commercial academic presses that increasingly either outsource this work or defer upon authors more and more the responsibility for editing and proofing and sometimes even formatting the layout of their own manuscripts). We are not interested in the maintenance of specific genres or disciplines (is it literary theory? poetry? philosophy? art history? memoir? sociology? cybernetics? speculative fiction? code? who can tell?), and thus we take seriously Derrida’s belief in a university “without condition” which has the task, especially by way of the humanities, of ensuring “the principal right to say everything, whether it be under the heading of fiction and the experimentation of knowledge, and the right to say it publicly, to publish it.” We want a radical Open of thought. This is thus also about freedom, something in very short supply in the university these days, and which also has something to do with well-being, with eudaimonia, or flourishing.

But we do not scorn the University-at-large, or even specific institutions (Harvard, University of Chicago, Brooklyn College, Eastern Carolina University, Berkeley, whatever), which is to note (again) that para- is also the space of the “beside” and the “near,” and more than wanting to go against or beyond the university, we seek a more supplementary (even inter- or co-dependent) relationship, if also an occasionally antagonistic one. And I am not sure I would draw the same distinctions that some of the editors of continent. and Speculations might want to draw between “academia” and the “university/University.” For me, the university (similar to how both Michael and Paul described academia/Academia) is everywhere and anywhere I am at any given moment, and this also extends to all who think and write alongside me, in whatever “location,” virtual, material, or otherwise. The university is not just the buildings and lawns

24. All manuscripts that arrive at punctum are subjected to so-called expert review (although often not “blind” and we believe in sending manuscripts to readers who will have some sort of pre-determined “sympathy” with the projects of the authors they are asked to read); at the same time, we have three basic questions for what we will and want to publish: Is it smart? Is it well-written? Is it weird?


demarcated by specific geographical coordinates (42° 22' 25" N, 71° 6' 38" W = Harvard), but anywhere we gather to disseminate: I define this as a practice of, quite literally (following the Oxford English Dictionary), “scattering [knowledge] abroad” and “sowing” things and “spreading [knowledge] here and there,” and “dispersing (things) so as to deposit them in all parts.” Obviously, in some cases, specific locations matter a great deal, and the very hard work of the faculty and student activists to preserve the formerly free system of public higher education in California or to maintain the disciplines of philosophy or paleography at certain universities in the UK are extremely worthwhile and important political-pedagogical causes that we should all support however we can. Wherever persons gather to pro-fess and learn, there is something of value worth protecting, while at the same time, the university proper is increasingly becoming less “liveable” for increasing numbers of teaching faculty and actual and potential learners, and we need to pay attention to that.27 While some people fight the good fight on the inside of specific campuses and even across specific campuses, some of us will have to be willing to create and foster new domains of thinking-together (which is not the same as thinking alike). This will require risk, and a willingness to fall and tumble into holes.

Speaking of holes: punctum, in the idioms of the Middle Ages and Roland Barthes (refer to my first epigraph above), is simultaneously the moment (Augustine’s punctum; writing as always momentary), the pricks and punctures and perforations made by awls punching holes in vellum (what makes writing, but even more so, books, possible, opening-to-writing/writing-as-opening), and also the “pointed instrument” that disturbs the studium, the sting, the speck, and the cut, into and out of which anything might fall or emerge, and by which we feel ourselves pierced (writing as shock to the system—ours, our minds, our bodies, but also systems more largely). punctum is also the cast of the dice: we’re taking chances out here. It’s a form of play, but it’s also work, perhaps the best precarious job at present in the humanities-at-large.

27. As Thomas Gokey, one of Speculation’s editors, has put it, “In the United States at least, universities have been turned into shell corporations for Sallie Mae. That might sound overly dramatic or overly cynical but I think it is the most accurate way to think about our current situation. Right now the community of questioning, learning, researching and teaching has been captured by a system whose primary function is to extract as much value out of academics as possible. The main thing that universities produce is precarious, indebted, docile workers. Universities are one of the primary tools used to produce and maintain class difference. For the most part the poorest get excluded outright, the richest pass “Go” and collect $200, everyone else gets buried in decades worth of crushing debt for the privilege of receiving an education that will be recognized. An academic is a battery that gets plugged into this dying machine” (Allen et alia, “Discussions Before an Encounter” continent. 2.2, 2012: 136-147).