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Author name: Hall, Gary

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**Better Living Through Sharing:  
Living Books About Life and Other Open Media Projects**

**Gary Hall**

**Europeana Plenary event: Connecting Society through Culture... the Power of Partnerships, Open Data and Cutting Edge Technology, Leuven, June 13-15.**

My name is Gary Hall. I'm a Research Professor at Coventry University and Director of the Centre for Disruptive Media there.

I'm co-founder of the journal *Culture Machine*, which is almost 14 years old now, and has been open access since its inception. Together with colleagues from Europe, the US and Australia, I'm also co-founder of the open access publisher: Open Humanities Press. Sigi Jottkandt, David Ottina, Paul Ashton and I established Open Humanities Press in 2008, working in collaboration with an international network of scholars, librarians and publishers, very much in response to the perceived crisis in scholarly publishing whereby:

- traditional academic presses have cut back on the number of research-led titles they bring out in order to focus on introductions, text books and reference works;
- and libraries are finding it difficult to afford the research that *is* published: both books *and* journals.

In the first instance OHP consisted of a collective of already-existing, open access, online-only journals. While all these journals – we currently have 14 - are of high quality, many had a problem generating a high level of prestige: because they're online journals rather than print; and because - although at least two are over 10 years old now - most are relatively new; and as Peter Suber points out, 'new journals can be excellent from birth, but even the best cannot be prestigious from birth'.<sup>i</sup> One of the ideas behind OHP was to bring these journals together under a single umbrella, and raise their profile and level of prestige in the eyes of academics and administrators by way of a meta-refereeing process.

To this end OHP has an Editorial Board that includes Alain Badiou, Steven Greenblatt, Bruno Latour and Gayatri Spivak, and an Editorial Oversight Group consisting of a rotating body of 13 scholars drawn from the Editorial Board, which we use to assess our titles according to a set of policies relating to publication standards, technical standards, and intellectual fit with OHP's

mission. As my colleague Sigi Jottkandt stresses, the press operates as a networked collaborative collective, ‘where editors support one another and share knowledge and skills, very much like an open source software community. And in fact, one of the things that makes a peer publishing initiative like OHP possible is precisely open source software, such as the Public Knowledge Project’s suite of open source publishing tools.’<sup>ii</sup>

The plan when we started was to spend the first few years establishing a reputation for OHP *with* its journals, before proceeding to tackle the more *difficult* problem of publishing book-length material open access.<sup>iii</sup> Difficult, because one of the main models of funding open-access *in the sciences*, author-side fees, is not easily transferable: either to book publishing or to the humanities. Authors in the humanities are not used to paying to have their work published – even if it’s a matter of just covering the cost of its production and processing and calling these ‘publication’ or ‘processing’ fees. They associate doing so with vanity publishing.

Humanities authors are also less likely to obtain the research grants needed to cover the cost of publishing author-pays. Most humanities research is funded out of the salaries paid to academics – so there’s not necessarily a project grant out of which such fees can be taken. That the humanities receive only a fraction of the amount of government funding science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) does only compounds the problem. As does the

fact that higher rejection rates in the humanities, as compared to STEM, means any grants would have to be significantly larger to cover the cost of the greater amount of time and labour involved. And *that's* just to publish journal articles. Publishing books author-pays would be more expensive still.

Things have developed much faster with OHP than we anticipated, however. As soon as OHP launched, a lot of people got in touch asking us when we were going to publish *books* open access, too. So in 2009 we established an OHP monograph project, run in collaboration with MPublishing, the scholarly publishing unit of the University of Michigan Library, UC-Irvine, UCLA Library, and the Public Knowledge Project headed by John Willinsky at Stanford University.<sup>iv</sup> The idea is to move forward: *both* open access publishing in the humanities; *and* the open access publishing of monographs.

We launched our monograph project with 5 *high-profile* book series; and then last December announced the publication of our first six monographs on a rolling basis:

- [The Democracy of Objects](#) — Levi R. Bryant
- [Immersion Into Noise](#) — Joseph Nechvatal

- [Telemorphosis: Theory in the Era of Climate Change, vol.1](#) — edited by Tom Cohen
- [Impasses of the Post-Global: Theory in the Era of Climate Change, vol.2](#) — edited by Henry Sussman
- [Terror, Theory and the Humanities](#) - Jeffrey R. Di Leo and Uppinder Mehan
- [The Cultural Politics of the New American Studies](#) - John Carlos Rowe

A seventh volume, [New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies](#), by Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin, is also due to appear shortly.

The way the monograph project works is like this: scholars come together ‘around areas of interest through a book series and perform the editorial oversight, manuscript selection, development [and peer review] for that series.’<sup>v</sup> The resulting books are run through the suite of services provided by MPublishing at the University of Michigan, and made freely available full text open access online, as HTML and nearly all of them PDF too. We’re also offering POD and eventually e-Pub books. MPub is subsidizing the production and distribution costs and providing its services in kind, in keeping with its mission to provide an array of sustainable publishing solutions to the scholarly community. We’re looking to use POD sales to cover production costs

(primarily MPub's), pay author royalties and to subsidize the costs of further OHP titles. So it's this partnership with MPublishing that enables us to afford to publish OA books, without author-pays/publishing fees or external funding; and to maintain high production standards in the process.

Now, all the titles I've shown you so far are fairly recognisable as books in the print-on-paper sense: the only difference really is that they're available online for free, open access. However, we also wanted to have a series experimenting with some of the more imaginative forms of publishing digital media make possible – which is where the Living Books About Life project comes in, which is what I've really been invited me to talk about.

Funded by JISC, and edited by myself, Clare Birchall at the University of Kent and Joanna Zylinska of Goldsmiths, Living Books About Life is a series of open access books about life - with life understood both philosophically and biologically - which provide a bridge between the humanities and the sciences. The twenty plus books that make up the series have been created by a globally-distributed network of writers and editors.

The series includes:

*Another Technoscience is Possible: Agricultural Lessons for the Posthumanities*, edited by Gabriela Mendez Cota

*The Life of Air: Dwelling, Communicating, Manipulating*, edited by Monika

Bakke

*Astrobiology and the Search for Life on Mars*, edited by Sarah Kember

*Bioethics™: Life, Politics, Economics*, edited by Joanna Zylińska

*Biosemiotics*, edited by Wendy Wheeler

*Cognition and Decision*, edited by Steven Shaviro

*The Mediations of Consciousness*, edited by Alberto López Cuenca

*Cosmetic Surgery: Medicine, Culture, Beauty*, edited by Bernadette Wegenstein

*Medianatures: The Materiality of Information Technology and Electronic*

*Waste*, edited by Jussi Parikka

*Energy Connections: Living Forces in Creative Inter/Intra-Action*, edited by

Manuela Rossini

*Extinction*, edited by Claire Colebrook

*Creative Evolution: Natural Selection and the Urge to Remix*, edited by Mark

Amerika

*Human Genomics: From Hypothetical Genes to Biodigital Materialisations*,

edited by Kate O'Riordan

*The In/Visible*, edited by Clare Birchall

*Nerves of Perception: Motor and Sensory Experience in Neuroscience*, edited

by Anna Munster

*Digitize Me, Visualize Me, Search Me: Open Science and its Discontents*, edited

by Gary Hall



*Neurofutures*, edited by Timothy Lenoir

*Partial Life*, edited by Oron Catts and Ionat Zurr

*Pharmacology*, edited by Dave Boothroyd

*Symbiosis*, edited by Janneke Adema and Pete Woodbridge

*Ubiquitous Surveillance*, edited by David Parry

*Veterinary Science: Animals, Humans and Health*, edited by Erica Fudge and  
Clare Palmer

These collaboratively-produced books repackage existing open access science-related research content from repositories such as ArXiv.org, the Public Library of Science and PubMed Central, by clustering it around selected topics to form a series of coherent single-themed volumes - on air, bioethics, cosmetic surgery, extinction, human geonomics, pharmacology, veterinary science and so on.

By creating twenty one ‘living books about life’ in just seven months – which means it’s also an example of speed writing and editing to set alongside Tom Scheinfeldt and Dan Cohen’s recent crowd-sourced book, *Hacking the Academy* (although that was just one volume, not over 20; even if, to be fair, it was created in just a week) – we see the series as a model for publishing, in a low-cost manner, many more such books in the future. Just four days after we

launched the site had already had 3,555 visitors with 11,294 page views – so clearly there’s a lot of interest in open access, and in collaborative experiments with new models of publishing.

We wanted to experiment with publishing books in this way for a number of reasons:

a. Funding agencies have been responsible for creating and making a lot of teaching and research content available online open access in shared spaces - Europeana, JISC Content and so on - but as we know they would like more people to use and re-use these resources. We wanted to show some of the interesting and imaginative things that can be done with this content if it’s approached collaboratively, in order to both help expand and discover new audiences for these open access resources and to maximise their use.

b. Many of us involved in this project have been advocating for academic research to be made OA for quite some time now. However, with this project we were looking to do more than just lobby for open access. Instead, we decided we’d take 20+ humanities scholars – scholars who were not necessarily familiar with OA - and get them actively engaged in some of the processes involved in publishing in this fashion. What we wanted was for them to start making more use of the research that was already available in OA journals and repositories. But we also wanted to make them more aware of the implications of *not* making research available OA.

We started by asking the editors to create their books by repackaging and re-presenting existing open access science-related research content. This could be previously published material from peer-reviewed OA journals or self-archiving repositories such as PubMed Central and JISC Content. The main stipulation we gave them was that each book had to contain a minimum of 10 such OA, science-related articles. We did this to ensure the majority of each book is made up of OA content that has already been peer-reviewed and is available under appropriate Creative Commons licences.

However, once they had these 10 articles, this content could be supplemented with additional material: peer-reviewed book chapters, but also podcasts, visualisations, interactive maps and so on. In addition, each editor was asked to write an original opening essay, linking their volume's content together and providing a bridge between the 'two cultures': the humanities and the sciences. Open Humanities Press has published the initial version of each living book online, open access, on an open source Wikimedia platform that allows users to join in the process of composing, editing, remixing, reimagining and reusing them. So all the books in the series, including the introductory essays, are themselves available to be shared and reused on an open basis.

Certainly, one of the most important aspects of the Living Books About Life series, for us, is the impact it has had on the researchers taking part. To start with there was a generally low level of knowledge among most of our

chosen, humanities-based, editors regarding publishing OA and the restrictions that are often placed on academic publications by publisher's licensing and copyright agreements. It quickly became clear that the majority of academics still require guidance regarding such issues - even about things that, to those of us who have been working in this area for a while now, probably seem quite obvious. For example, it took some of our editors quite some time to realise that, while *they* may be able to openly access a given article online from their computer at work because their institution has taken out a subscription to a particular journal, JSTOR, Project Muse or whatever, other people whose institutions have *not* taken out such a subscription, or who are *not* affiliated to an institution, may not necessarily be able to access the same article online at all. There was also a need to clarify the difference between open access articles made available under Creative Commons licences allowing others to copy, reuse, distribute, transmit and display them publicly and to use them to make and distribute derivative works; and articles with proprietary licenses that have been made available open access in repositories such as PubMed, but which are *not* available for reuse.

By working through these issues, and showing them that if work is not made available in this way, then people can't access, read, cite and use it for projects like this, we found many of our editors turning into staunch advocates of OA themselves. The project has certainly changed the attitudes of many of

these researchers, not least in raising their awareness of issues around publisher's licensing and copyright agreements. As one of our editors put it: 'I am now evangelical about making work publicly available, and am really encouraging colleagues to put things out there.'

c. But as well as all that, the Living Books About Life project – much like our sister series, Liquid Books, about which I'll say more shortly - allows us to challenge the physical and conceptual limitations of the traditional codex book by including more than just journal articles and book chapters. We've been able to include *whole books* in our living books. And not just that, but short extracts from books, as well as pages, snippets, references, quotations, annotations, links, tags, even audio-visual material from YouTube and Vimeo.

d. So publishing a book in this way *also* allows us to explore some of the possibilities of the general movement *toward* publishing academic work online, what with open access, Google Book Search and iBook Author, Scrib'd, Smashwords, and the development of electronic book readers such as Amazon's Kindle, Sony's Reader and their multi-use rivals including Apple's iPad.

e. One of the main motivations behind this project, however, was to experiment with publishing a book, not just open access, but open editing and libre content, too. So, as I say, these books are not just freely available throughout Europe and the world for anyone to read: these 'living books about life' are themselves 'living' in the sense they're open on a read/write basis for

users to help compose, edit, annotate, translate and remix. This means that, as well as repackaging the available open access science material on ‘life’ into a series of books, the project is also engaged in rethinking ‘the book’ itself as a living, collaborative endeavour in the age of open access, open science, open data and open education.

Anyone can get involved in creating books for the series, or in adapting existing books for use in teaching – say, as an alternative form of course pack or course reader, one where the content and form of the book can be negotiated, updated and altered by students themselves, under the guidance of the tutor. In teaching situations, these living books thus become student-centred, customisable learning tools which actively involve students in curriculum design.

Perhaps the best example I can give of this philosophy in action is provided by the course reader Joanna Zylinska developed for our sister series, Liquid Books. This was used for a ten-week graduate theory course, ‘Technology and Cultural Form: Debates, Models, Dialogues’, taught in a workshop format at Goldsmiths College, University of London, to 25 students. The course discusses the relationship between various media and technological forms, their social uses and the culture in which they operate. In this context,

the ‘liquid reader’ provides a practical case study of a media form that students can both think about and actively construct. A basic ‘skeletal’ course reader was first devised online at the beginning of the course using the wiki platform. It included the key course content, and was subsequently opened to customisation by students. Throughout the course, students were then involved in adding and editing the reader’s content. They were also encouraged to experiment with the idea of ‘the reader’ (or, more broadly, the idea of ‘the book’) through activities such as collaboratively writing a wiki-style essay (on the topic, ‘Can you use the Wikipedia model to write and edit books?’) and putting together an online gallery of their photographic works as part of the ‘reader’. The idea behind this project was to provide an open-access study tool which facilitates the sharing of knowledge and pedagogic practice. The course reader is freely available both to Goldsmiths students and to students, tutors and general users internationally. (Easy to follow instructions on to how to do all this are provided on the blog of the Living Books project.)

I want to end by quickly showing you how we’re also using these living books as part of the broader ‘Open Media’ strategy we’ve developed in the Media Department at Coventry School of Art and Design to address head-on some of the challenges faced by HE in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In the last few years we’ve launched four open media courses, all of which are freely available online. The classes on these courses – not just the readers, but the *classes*

themselves - are open to anyone, anywhere, to participate in, add to the discussions, and even rip, remix and mash-up. This applies to the schedule, lectures, lesson contents, exercises and assignments, recommended reading, online talks and interviews with visiting speakers, as well as a number of practical 'how to' videos, all of which are available under a CC-BY-SA license.

Photography and Narrative, and Picturing the Body, are the two longest-standing of these open courses, dating from 2009. They enable academics, researchers, students and practitioners from both inside and outside the university to collaboratively produce, curate and engage with a wide range of media and educational resources relating to photography. After featuring in *Wired* magazine, where they were described as 'shaking up education', approx. 1,000 people signed up to take these open classes with 20,000 people 'attending' in August 2011 alone. Since Sept. 2011, 29,000 people from 1,632 cities in 107 countries have now passed through these classes.

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## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> Peter Suber, 'Ten Challenges for Open Access Journals', lecture at the 1st Conference on Open Access Scholarly Publishing (COASP) 14-16 September, Lund, Sweden. Available at <http://river-valley.tv/ten-challenges-for-open-access-journals/>. Also available as 'Ten Challenges for Open Access Journals', SPARC Open Access Newsletter, issue #138, October 2, 2009. Available at <http://www.earlham.edu/~peters/fos/newsletter/10-02-09.htm>.



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<sup>ii</sup> Sigi Jöttkandt, John Willinsky, Shana Kimball, 'The Role of Libraries in Emerging Models of Scholarly Communications, LIANZA, 13 October, 2009  
Christchurch, New Zealand  
[http://openhumanitiespress.org/Jottkandt\\_13-10-09\\_LIANZA.pdf](http://openhumanitiespress.org/Jottkandt_13-10-09_LIANZA.pdf).

<sup>iii</sup> For more on higher rejection rates in the humanities, see Mary Waltham's 2009 report for the National Humanities Alliance, 'The Future of Scholarly Journals Publishing among Social Sciences and Humanities Associations'  
[http://www.nhalliance.org/research/scholarly\\_communication/index.shtml](http://www.nhalliance.org/research/scholarly_communication/index.shtml); and also Peter Suber, 'Promoting Open Access in the Humanities', 2004: <http://www.earlham.edu/~peters/writing/apa.htm>.

<sup>iv</sup> The Public Knowledge Project is developing an equivalent for monographs to their Open Journal Systems. See John Willinsky, 'Toward the Design of an Open Monograph Press', *Journal of Electronic Publishing*, 12(1), 2009. Available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/3336451.0012.103>.

<sup>v</sup> Sigi Jöttkandt, John Willinsky, Shana Kimball, 'The Role of Libraries in Emerging Models of Scholarly Communications, LIANZA, 13 October, 2009  
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[http://openhumanitiespress.org/Jottkandt\\_13-10-09\\_LIANZA.pdf](http://openhumanitiespress.org/Jottkandt_13-10-09_LIANZA.pdf).