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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.

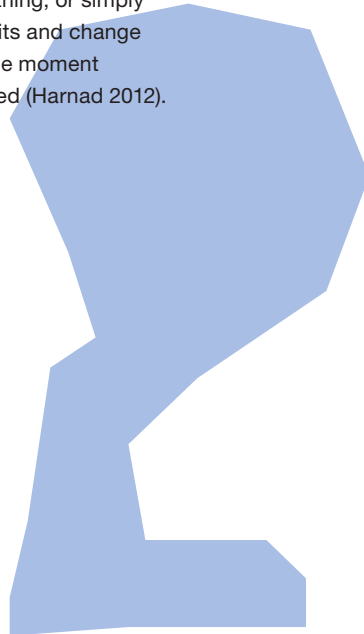
Denise Ferreira da Silva takes the concept of poethics further to consider a new kind of speculative thinking—a black feminist poethics—which rejects the linear and rational, one-dimensional thought that characterises Western

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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