Sarah Kember: Rethinking where the thinking happens

This is an edited transcript of a public conversation between Eva Weinmayr and Sarah Kember, who is the Director of a new academic publishing house, *Goldsmiths Press.*

Open access — an enclosure

Eva Weinmayr: I wanted to talk to you about your ideas and plans for Goldsmiths Press. I'd like to use this opportunity today to conduct a public interview. So, I have prepared questions, but if anybody around the table wants to add anything – just chip in.

Sarah Kember: Okay, I made a little list of things that I thought we might address mainly as problems, but also as kind of opportunities. Some of it has to do with policy around open access, which I would like to talk to you about. It is a big issue for academic publishers.

Eva: It would be good to briefly explain open access in scholarly publishing. In principle it seems like a great idea to make research available online at no cost. But this also has consequences. Somebody has to cover the costs....

Sarah: Exactly. The publishing house shifts their business model from charging readers to charging authors for the costs. It is triggered by UK policy around open access and copyright reform. [1] [sighs]

The "Gold" [2] model for example is a business model, which charges the author a processing fee and— this is a big issue for academic publishers. It comes from sciences and engineering subjects, but for arts, humanities and social sciences the pot of government money available for open access journal publishing is tiny or non-existent. Therefore it would mean real streamlining – a massive reduction of research and output. There is also a top-down, policy push towards open access book publishing without any central budget attached to it at all. Other publishers who are producing open access books are drawing on institutional money, donations and, ironically, good old fashioned sales of the print-on-demand versions.

So Goldsmiths Press will take the better end of open access publishing, the green rather than gold model, which means we can still give some content away, we can use archives and repositories, but we're not trying to transfer the burden of the cost

from the reader to the author. This is a no-go. We're making stuff freely available, when we can, but we are not in a fantasy world, that says that content is in any sense free.

Scholarly writing shut down and clamped into two very restrictive modes

Another really big issue for me, and for a lot of people I talk to now, is realising how standardised publishing has become. Academics have to write in two modes now and that is really incrediblye boring and restrictive and not particularly readerly, and not particularly inventive, creative or intellectual, necessarily. We have basically two formats: we have 7000 word journal articles, which are social science orientated and not really suiting people in arts or humanities, who might be better at writing essays, which is more discursive, open, less defensive. That very rigid journal-publishing model, which of course gets all of the citation and audit points attached to it, is a very problematic format for me. So you've got your 7000-word journal article and you've got your 70 000-word academic monograph, which is increasingly being pushed to be more of a textbook, because publishers can only make money out of textbooks. They can't really make money out of monographs. So again: a real sense of constriction. A real sense of scholarly writing being shut down and clamped into two very restrictive modes. I want to address that in some way.

Eva: How can you do this differently?

Sarah: Well, there is already some innovation of course, when you're getting publishers like Palgrave, who I'm writing for at the moment, doing short monographs. So, not 70 000 words, but 25 000 – 30 000 words or a range of 30 000 – 50 000 thousand words. It sounds quite trivial, but it isn't!

One of the reasons I agreed to write a short monograph for Palgrave is that I knew I could write it differently. I can write differently and I'm able to create a culture around not just academic writing, but, more broadly, encourage scholarly communication that is less constrained. So, you know, at the moment these very stereotypical terms of "you are a theorist or a practitioner" really constrain people who work across theory, practice and performance boundaries. And I am working in an intellectual environment where pretty much everybody does that, and yet we have very separated and restricted outlets for that kind of work.

So this is a platform for Goldsmiths beginning to commission experimental fiction. And that really excites me. So we are actually going to — as university — to publish fiction as well as trade books. Our first title, Les Back's Academic Diary is a trade book. It was written for a more general audience and has been selling well in bookshops. So we are messing up a few institutional categories here. In fact we will be the first UK university press to publish fiction.

Temporary stabilization * What was ever not fluid about print?

So, I think Goldsmiths Press came in at that time of realizing that being a digital first publisher does not mean being a digital only publisher. And in that sense, it's not all about moving from print to digital. And lots of times, when I speak about what's going on in scholarly publishing it has to do with "can we please do better than these ridiculous binaries: print and digital or fluid and fixed books." What the hell is that? What was ever not fluid about print? It was always a contingent, as you were saying, always a temporary stabilization. And anyone who knows anything about critical theory, anyone who ever read Barthes or Derrida would know that the book always came off the page, was always about references, was always about intertextuality.

Rethinking where the thinking happens

I am interested in what Minnesota University Press are doing for example. In what some people want to call "grey literature", which might be blogs and tweets, scripts and storyboards and things like that. But for me its not all about to rush over to social media and that's where the future of publishing is. It's not. But it is about rethinking where the thinking happens, institutionally. Conventional academic publishing just sees research or scholarship as a particular thing and it becomes rather fixed and rather fossilized. I want to push that and ask where is scholarship? And who are scholars?

Stone age claim * Having to be right

And of course one of the other big constraints for us is the audit, the REF. You know this?

Eva: [sighs] Yeah, the Research Excellence Framework.

Sarah: Well, yeah! The massive academic audit, which has been going on since I've been an academic and has had, I think, appalling effects on scholarly work. It makes it more conservative. It makes it churned. You know the obligation is to produce a monograph every three years or so. If you don't, your tenure might be in doubt. You won't get promotion... you know. All these institutional award things come into play. But it's NOT been good! It tends to mitigate against experimental or speculative work and pushes everyone... towards a particularly stone age claim for the status of the work, that what we produce has an impact, has economic benefits and is quite reduced in that way. Having to be right! is how I put it. Do you know what I mean? It reminds me of my favourite bit of feminist writing from the 70s — that stuff is so relevant for us now — by Xaviére Gauthier, who wrote like Hélène Cixous, and many others, about this frightful masculine fashion of speaking in order to be right, in order to put other people in the wrong. It's a kind of scientism, you know, to have impact, to be economically valuable and research having to have this direct claim to be able to

describe the world to you. Academics – particularly in the arts and humanities, don't do that, you know, and it has pushed our research to be more like that. And it's false. And it's fake. And I dislike it intensely and I want to recreate a space for what Cixous described as a kind of writerliness. So I am very, very, interested in how academic work becomes writerly again, or speculative, or all the synonyms that we might use for that. But it's something in tension with this tendency to make truth claims with what you are doing. And we are all being obliged to do that —in a bizarre way.

Peer review * Dialogue rather than judgement

Eva: I am quite interested in the potential of peer review in this process. On one side you probably need it in order to create credibility. But there are massive problems with peer review, which tends to be anonymous and judgmental. How could peer review take full advantage of what it actually could be: a dialogue, a constructive and transparent critique rather than judgments?

Sarah: It's a huge problem for any publisher starting out now how to address the problems of double-blind peer review — a system, Carol Stabile [3] refers to, which is broken and corrupt and differentiated, which means that it can be abused. So people hide behind anonymous peer review. Certain journals that remain nameless here have a reputation for doing so, and there can be grandstanding abuses — really, really.

There is a piece by Rosalind Gill in The Hidden Injuries of the Neoliberal University and it is about the abuses of double blind peer review and how it a-symmetrically affects women and early career researchers. It can do untold damage. It can actually stop somebody in the early stages in their career from going on, if they get something which is really vitriolic. "What is this? This is rubbish, bla bla bla", right? That can see people off.

Boycott them

One of the other problems with publishing at the moment is free labour. Who supplies it and who benefits from it? [...] They are exporting a lot of that labour to editors. Editors are not paid and they are not rewarded. The institution is not rewarding you for doing that. So we're doing more and more and more of their work as they continue to profit massively from it.

There is a piece by Ronan Deazley [4] pointing out how much profit is made by the English language speaking journal publishers from academic free labour in research and reviewing – and then they want to charge us [laughs], so we're double ripped off to the tune of – I think the figure was over £1.7 billion for 2007. That's a lot of money. And the lawyer was saying: Boycott them! Boycott commercial academic journal publishers. They are ripping us off at least once, twice, probably three times. That was interesting coming from an academic lawyer. [laughs]

Free labour and peer review is not an easy problem to fix. The answer is not: It was closed – let's make it open. It's not going to be that easy. One of the big problems of peer review is a pragmatic thing: it is very difficult to get people to peer review anything, because they are too busy. Actually a lot of your time as a journal editor is spent not reading work, not commissioning work, but simply chasing up maybe up to ten reviewers for each piece. It drives me mad. So I've got to find a way of dealing with it pragmatically and politicizing it and joining a bigger conversation, which is about the problems of peer review and it's about citation practices and it's about free labour.

Boys' citation club

Eva: You mentioned citation just now. At some point you said you were planning to introduce a female citation proportion policy? It sounds like a brilliant idea!
Sarah: [laughs] I am being naughty, because what I perceive is that – and my research is in the field of New Media, Feminist Theory, Science and Technology studies – out there in science and Technology Studies or Cultural Theory, there are a lot of boys. The broader context actually is all about conservatism, is all about shutting down on practices. And one of the things to attend to, which I perceive, is increasing masculinization. Along with conservatism it's like what we have got in academic work, at least in my field, is a boys' citation club. There is something inherently conservative in citation anyway, right? In order to be recognised, you have to be associated with this author or that. It tends to be dead white male, the usual kind of practice that we have known for a long time. But it's just becoming worse, and it's becoming more cynical.

The point is: About 20 years ago, a lot of feminists got their heads round ubiquitous computing, chaos theory, complexity theory and critiqued them, problematised them in relationship to postmodernism, Hayles, Sobchack – they were all there. What is happening at the moment is that the new generation of young male scholars is re-discovering – for example through ubiquitous computing – things like chaos and complexity, but it's as if the feminists working in those areas had never been there. They are simply erased. So even when they do engage with people that are difficult to avoid in scholarship at the moment like Rosi Braidotti, or Donna Haraway, big names – they probably won't go near Donna Haraway, because it's hard to strip bits away from her. But with Rosi Braidotti, who is a Deleuzian and Deleuzian philosophy is very trendy at the moment, they go for the Deleuzian bits, but they leave out the feminist bits. This is making me furious.

Imperfect strategies * Parody, Irony, Satire

So furious, that I've considered what for me are imperfect strategies for dealing with it. They are only imperfect strategies and for me they include things like parody and irony and satire. So I have sat down with some friends of mine Caroline Bassett and

Kate O'Riordan and we have started writing a book which parodies and satirises current citation practices by only citing women. It's tempting, right? Doing a George Perec piece, not just leaving the "e" out, but leaving the "he" out. Well that's not exactly what we're doing (its kind of hard) but we are certainly inspired by the thought.

"Metrically inadequate"

I was at a conference in Coventry the other week with all the other publishers starting up at the moment and John Holmwood, a sociologist, was talking how his own institution is encouraging people — kind of obliging people — to do collaborative research across institutions. That gets more points, right. But the institution is vetting who he collaborates with and some academics are deemed to be "metrically inadequate", which means their work is not cited enough. Immediately my thought, you know, it's very facile, to get a t-shirt printed with "metrically inadequate" across the front [laughter] —I don't know what else to do! It's hopeless! The conversation we had as a group was, well can we do our own metrics? Can we in any sense use data as a tool of intervention here? This is something we need to talk about. Carol is working on this. So are grass roots open access publishers. It's not easy. We don't have access to the stuff Google has access to. We would never reach any kind of comparable scale. So for me, I do fall back on old-fashioned strategies of humour, parody and satire. I think they work to a limited extent. So I am going for the T-shirt.

Messing up binaries * Getting in the same room

I think metrics is such a minefield of a problem. We obviously are going to have to do it. As Director of a university press I will have to play the games that irk me. I have to produce work that is auditable. The press increases our citations as an institution, whilst problematising them, whilst politicising them. I'd rather do that, than create something outside of an audit that would have no power at all. One of the advantages of not being independent, of being an institutional press is that I can start a messed up category. Messing up that binary of auditable, impact, sanctioned, innovation-based research versus experimental, interventional, politicised, activist stuff, because I'm in it. That's the kind of work that the press is really trying to do. It's not about saying "the answer is essays again". I love the idea, that we can bring back a lot of the forms of communication, knowledge and communication practices, that have been excluded and extruded gradually from the institution and from academic publishing. Essays, manifestos, pamphlets, booklets, I love all that kind of stuff, the binding, everything, the kind of art book feel of something, the feminist journal feel. We are deliberately evoking those historical references, because it's not accidental that there is at least a handful, already, of new academic publishers coming on. It's not surprising that this is happening now. These things came up before in order to resist institutionalisation and all the rest of it, you know. We recognise that we are reinventing new provisional forms, that's fine, but then what we don't do is to make them the answer. The answer is the struggle. We have to try and push against this kind of constriction of what scholarly practice means at the moment. And that's kind of a big job.

The other bit of it is to recognise that we are doing this within a loose affiliation of what – in a more capitalist system – would be deemed competitors. The competition is getting together at the moment: Open Humanities Press, Open Books, Meson, Mattering Press: we are getting in the same room. We've all got our own mission statements, our own manifestos on open access, on peer review and citation. What can we do together to get a slightly louder voice?

Funding

Joyce Cronin or Althea Greenan (couldn't identify the voice): How is the press funded ?

Sarah: Our model at the moment is that we'll get institutional funding. That's what I have been battling for. There was no question that the institution was very excited. I think Goldsmiths can see why Goldsmiths should be a press right now and we have that verified. But we are in hard times and everybody knows, that you don't make money out of publishing. So it's kind of a hard sell to the institution. There is a level of institutional funding. Its not that high and neither are we treating it as an income supply. Over a period over four years we are expected to become stand-alone.

This means they function as bank, as a cash flow for us and that helps hugely. We also get support in kind. We have the communication department helping with our website. Other departments will start to feed in as they see how the press will benefit them. Our margin is very small and we're not heavy on infrastructure. Apart from the institutional start-up funds, we have a business model based on grants, recruitment and of course, where we can, sales.

Antagonism

Karen Di Franco: That's a really interesting model that you are presenting. It is not necessary an opposition. It's trying to use your position to work towards making it work according to your needs.

Sarah: Trying to get ourselves out of the habit of oppositionalism is key to this. I guess part of my research is to figure out a kind of political theory and so I think a lot with Chantal Mouffe with this notion of antagonism, which is not oppositionalism. It's based on deconstruction. They aren't opposites. They are constitutive outsides, this thing and that thing enable each other. It was always a mistake thinking that academia is outside of industry, the forces of marketisation and commercialisation – somehow kind of pure. It never was. So think again, what do you want to do strategically, not in opposition, but perhaps in tension with what the marketisation of academia actually does. It does mean occupying much more uncomfortable, but also... I don't know — somehow more... open possibilities.

I mean, for me personally a lot of the concern is, how do we avoid thinking in terms

of the opposition between the terms of the neoliberal academic subject, which are traditionally now recognised as being feminised, flexible, caring, all of that kind of stuff and a kind of romantic subject position. There is no point in rethinking publishing or writing in terms of romanticism. We are going to starve in the garret again. It's not going to catch on. Given that we are in these kinds of positions, we have to negotiate them: How tactically, locally or collectively do we do this? That's kind of where we are. We don't have answers.

Academic activism

Eva: In this text, Sarah, which you published on ADA [5] you write "academic capitalism may therefore be seen to be giving rise to at least one form of academic activism". And if we talk about our "Why Publish?" research being funded by University of the Arts' Enterprise and Employability department [laughs] — it is exactly the same sort of balancing act between being subsumed under the neo-liberal agenda or creating a space to critically discuss these terms.

Sarah: It is, yes. We are obliged to do it anyway, as we are in an institutional environment, which is basically: Publish or perish. I think you raised this in one of your questions: am I making things worse by enabling short monographs, which just have a faster turn around? Yes probably, but also no. Because those shorter monographs can encourage directly and indirectly people to open out the ways they communicate. So the very platforms that are in a sense restricting and determining to a certain extent the conditions and the terms of debate can be "hijacked". Can we start to use terms like that? Officially I wouldn't. In my own work I freely use these sort of terms "occupy, hijack"...

Eva: That's "infrastructure in the making". [6] [laughs]

Sarah: Yes, let's go with Irit. [laughs] We are remaking infrastructures. And I think what we are doing here is a direct politically activist critique through setting up a press. I am in no doubt that's what I am up to. But it is a kind of "making things" at the same time. And a lot of us are not used to that, you know, proper academics... [laughs] but I think the culture is changing around that. This is an opportunity for us to do something: to reclaim some of what matters to us about scholarly communication rather than what we have to do to jump through the REF hoops and satisfy our sense of wanting to be "metrically adequate". [laughter]

Institutions taking over * Playing a double game

Andrea Francke: [...] I am not connected to any institution, so I am quite cynical about universities. I was a MA student here at Chelsea, not too long ago. And there is a part that worries me: what happens, when you expand the infrastructure of the university taking over your own spaces so that suddenly your own fiction gets inside the dis-

course of "best practices" and evaluation and citation. The academic, or the writer or the artist becomes an entrepreneur to make everything productive and justified and then – your fiction is going to be done. I feel that a lot of practice-based PhDs and artworks are made to fit certain modes of the university. I am quite interested in the idea of the Undercommons [7]., this other way of relating to the institution, which instead of allowing to take over more and more space, makes you aware that if academics were well paid they would have time to do their own fiction and do these other things. It's a very tricky thing to navigate.

Sarah: Yeah I know exactly what you mean, but I think increasingly I simply don't believe that there is a position to occupy that is not inside it. And that's just like a kind of theoretical, political theoretical belief. I am so sympathetic with those older, more oppositional models, or anarchic or undercurrent models, and I think you are right. There is so much irony at stake here in terms of playing a double game the whole time. You know, I am marketing Goldsmiths, right? That's what I am doing – partly – and I have to live with that. I can live with that. On this basis, I think, Goldsmiths Press still represents something broadly antagonistic to the institution or rather within the institution. And I have to live with that discomfort. I actually think the other model is entirely legitimate, but for me it simply doesn't work and I can't make it work within the institution. I can make this version of antagonism work and as it begins to catalyse me I just look for more modes of antagonism. That's all there is. I think.

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Eva Weinmayr is an artist, writer and co-founder of AND Publishing. She is currently conducting a practice-based PhD on feminist pedagogy, authorship and politics of publishing and dissemination at Valand Academy in Gothenburg.

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Why Publish? is a research project to collectively explore the pedagogical, creative and critical spaces of publishing. www.andpublishing.org

Notes

[1] The Finch report on open access (UK, 2012) states that open access would lead to efficiency benefits for researchers and produce economic growth. Barriers to access to publicly funded research 'are increasingly unacceptable in an online world' as they 'restrict the innovation, growth and other benefits'. Subsequently the UK Research Councils mandated in their RCUK Policy on Open Access the use of Creative Commons license (CC BY) allowing for commercial re-use of research material with attribution rather than a license for non-commercial use or the author's permission.

[2] The advocated "Gold" model of open access asks researchers to pay an upfront fee to a journal for their paper to be made available online, free of charge, as soon as it is published.

[3] Carole Stabile is co-editor of ADA, A Journal for Gender, New Media and Technology, an open access, peer reviewed journal published by Fembot collective, University of Oregon. They developed open peer review process as an alternative to double-blind peer review, a process where author and reviewer remain anonymous.

[4] Deazley, Ronan and Mathis Jason. Writing About Comics and Copyright. CREATe Working Paper, 9. 2013. http://www.create.ac.uk/publications/writing-about-comics-and-copyright.

[5] Kember, Sarah. Opening out from open access: writing and publishing in response to neoliberalism. ADA a journal for gender, new media and technology 4. 2014. http://www.adanewmedia.org/2014/04/issue4-kember/

[6] Rogoff, Irit. Infrastructure. Keynote lecture at Former West, 20 March 2013. http://www.formerwest.org/DocumentsConstellationsProspects/Contributions/Infrastructure. See also freethought collective. https://freethought-infrastructure.org.

[7] Harney, Stefano & Moten, Fred. The Undercommons, Fugitive Planning & Black Studies, Wivenhoe / New York / Port Watson: Minor Compositions, 2013.

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