

Experiments towards Editing Otherwise

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In the context of my own position as a humanities scholar in the UK, in this article, I look at the way in which universities have operationalised a system in which the measures of scholarly prestige, success, and distinction are increasingly monopolised by large publishing corporations, mainly based in the West. This evolution has reinforced a productivity-driven and competitive framework of academic work, which significantly influences the subjectivities, interpersonal dynamics, and emotional landscapes of humanities scholars. Through my editorial work in the context of the *Culture Machine* special issue 'Publishing after Progress', I try to move away from systemic pressures on academic work and their effects. With this, I aim to create conditions under which thinking (and doing) 'Publishing after Progress' becomes possible, or at least plausible, as an experimental, intellectual, and political quest beyond the immediate demands of productivity-driven and competitive academic environments. My approach horizontally engages a heterogeneous range of knowledge creating actors not merely as competitive producers of research outputs but as active agents in shaping the conditions of academic work, by means of a creative, non-utilitarian, and collaborative publishing undertaking.

Navigating the Existential Dimensions of Academic Work

After completing my MA in art history, modern history, and business administration at the University of Zurich, I worked outside of academia for nearly 20 years. I cannot claim a stable, singular personal or professional identity that is nationally, culturally, or linguistically fixed (Brah, 1996; Risam, 2019): I was a design and architecture journalist in Zurich; a managing editor in publishing houses in Zurich and Leipzig; a co-director and co-curator of an independent space for design discourse and exhibition in Basel; a para-academic researcher in manifold constellations and places; and a temporary lecturer in art

schools in Bern, Basel, Zurich, Paris, and Amsterdam. Work and not-work hard to be separated; shifting roles, identities, and meanings (of work, of life); the values behind and the understandings of my work clashing, more often than not, with institutional expectations; ebb and flow of self-esteem, stress, anxiety, joy, creativity – all tangled up. If I, fairly recently, returned to academia solely to sort out my work-life balance and emotional equilibrium (which, to be honest, was part of my rationale to do a PhD at Coventry University), well, good luck with that.

The reason for this persistent blurring of professional and personal ambits is, as the psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Christophe Dejours points out, that work is fundamentally existential and central to the construction of identity, agency, and self-esteem – with both suffering and joy being intrinsic elements of professional life and with purpose and meaning directly tied to the work environment itself rather than solely found externally (Dejours, 2019; Dejours et al., 2018).

In this article, I turn my attention towards the existential dimensions of academic work, specifically of authorship and editorship. Combining personal reflections with historical and theoretical analysis, I will look at how universities – not least through research evaluation mechanisms such as the national Research Excellence Framework (REF) in the UK designed to evaluate the quality of research within higher education institutions – have operationalised a system in which the measures of scholarly prestige, success, and distinction are increasingly monopolised by a handful of large commercial publishers, such as Springer, Elsevier, and Taylor & Francis.

I will problematise how, in this system, prestige, success, and distinction are closely linked to efficiency and visibility metrics tied to quantifiable outputs. This evolution reinforces normative understandings of academic work where competition and productivity are foregrounded – often at the expense of the subjective, contextual, and interpersonal aspects of scholarly labour. This leads to heightened feelings of stress and suffering at work, alienation from and loss of meaning in work among humanities scholars. While this dynamic and its psychological and emotional effects have been explored in research on academic audit cultures, the psychology of work, and organisational studies, there has been less research on this particular aspect of the neoliberal transformation of the university in critical scholarship on academic publishing (Ball, 2012; Churcher & Talbot, 2020; Dejours, 2019; Dejours et al., 2018). Here, the focus has been primarily on the geopolitical, technological, economic, epistemic, and social conditions under which scholars

publish their work (Adema, 2021; Albornoz et al., 2020; Chan et al., 2020; Moore, 2019).

In response to the problem outlined above and expanding existing literature in the field with a critical perspective on contemporary academic publishing cultures, I want to dwell on the suffering experienced in contemporary universities, which, in parts, is also my own. I do so not in terms of cynicism or defeat. Rather, I take Dejours' prompt seriously that – instead of seeking fulfilment outside their professional environments – individuals and communities should actively be involved in addressing the systemic and institutional conditions that lead to suffering at work (Dejours, 2019; Dejours et al., 2018). Hence, I understand this, my suffering, as a challenge to reflect on my editorial work, self-understanding, and praxis in the context of the 'Publishing after Progress' special issue of the journal *Culture Machine*.

The hypothesis I put forward in this article is that *Culture Machine* – rooted in discourses critical of cultural hegemony and committed to experiments that critically challenge the boundaries and norms of scholarly institutions, traditional scholarship, scholarly politics, and praxis – invites (and enables) such a self-reflection. Hence, I perceive my editorial engagement with *Culture Machine* as an intervention into the way scholarly work is administered under current productivity-driven publishing regimes and as an exploration towards 'editing otherwise'. It serves me to experimentally facilitate a space in which a 'Publishing after Progress' can be tentatively approached collaboratively, surpassing the immediate constraints of a productivity-focused academic setting that renders contextual, social, and emotional dimensions of academic work insignificant. I will ask: What modes of scholarly subjectivity, agency, and meaning in work might (re)emerge from my exploratory and experimental approach towards 'editing otherwise' that current publishing regimes tend to overlook or have rendered inconsequential?

Answering this question is not merely an intellectual undertaking, geared at generating abstractable insights. Rather it is an exploration that perpetually, and in a situated way, grapples with the possibility of a politics of engagement in scholarship in an academic system in which scholarly work increasingly is seen as a function of citation metrics and the efficient production of research outputs. To make this grappling legible, at least to a certain extent, I borrow from ethnographic practice by using a series of short narrative vignettes providing brief, evocative accounts of the process of editing 'Publishing after Progress' that is still ongoing while I write this article. By means of these vignettes, I want to invite editors, peer reviewers,

and authors to challenge themselves: to, within their own spheres of influence, induce a crack in hegemonic academic publishing cultures in order to cultivate collaborative conditions of academic work that value scholarly agency, purposeful interaction, and psychological support above mere productivity and visibility metrics.

Systemic Forces: Changing Notions of Prestige, Success, Distinction, and Value

The historian Aileen Fyfe locates the precedents of today's academic journals in the 18th and 19th centuries: namely, in the journals that were published under the auspices of learned societies, academies, and, later, university presses that were once the dominant institutions in modern science. These early academic journals served scholars – a group that historically went beyond university-based academic communities including members of learned societies and amateur scholars, for example – to share and discuss their research with like-minded peers beyond their closest circle of acquaintances (Fyfe, 2020; Fyfe & Gielas, 2020; Fyfe et al., 2017).

In this section, I reflect on evolving standards of academic publishing, linking the early traditions of scholarly communication fostered by learned societies and university presses to the current landscape dominated by commercial publishers such as Springer, Taylor & Francis, and Elsevier. I explore how notions of academic prestige, success, and distinction – as well as the perceived value of scholarly work – have changed with the centralisation of academic publishing by a few big players.

Universities and learned societies – emerging in Western countries and branching out into various colonial territories, as exemplified by the American Philosophical Society (APS) (Conclin, 1947) – were crucial in the forceful establishment and proliferation of Euro-centric humanist models of modern science and disciplinary knowledge as the only legitimate paths for scientific progress at the expense of the diverse belief-systems, ideas on knowing, and knowledge existing in different cultures and societies (Alatas, 2000; Harding, 2002; Smith, 1999). Journals, as the societies' publishing venues and communicative organs, played an important role in shaping a unified disciplinary discourse and in determining who (and whose knowledge) belonged to a disciplinary community. By selecting content that aligned with certain intellectual standards, these venues – not least by means of editorial gatekeeping processes, practices, and decisions – defined community boundaries through the inclusion and exclusion of both knowledges and individuals (Knöchelmann, 2023).

Editorship, as a gatekeeping activity, differed substantially from journal to journal. It included intellectual aspects such as commissioning new pieces, assessing and selecting from submissions, and preparing selected manuscripts for publication. It also contained management functions regarding the journals' production, planning, time-keeping, circulation, and financing (Fyfe, 2020; Fyfe & Gielas, 2020). Historically, making editorial decisions was often not the task of a singular editor. Typically, this work – and the responsibility going along with it – was distributed among society members. This idea is exemplified in once common practices of refereeing where, in brief, submissions were reviewed by qualified society members before publication. As Noah Moxham and Aileen Fyfe (2018) state, refereeing emphasised collective responsibility over the content and the judicious use of institutional resources. In this context, declining to publish an article, rather than being the result of an authoritative verdict by an acclaimed subject expert following stringent criteria, was the result of a negotiation among peers, often culminating in a withdrawal initiated by an author (Fyfe et al., 2019).

However, it would be shortsighted to interpret these collaborative, horizontal, and dialogic processes in editorial decision-making as indicative of an inherent (non-competitive) 'humanities ethos': a notion of the (humanities) scholar, editor, and author as motivated by an intrinsic desire to know, to add insights to a continuing conversation, and to interact with the ideas of others through horizontal dialogue, open sharing, and communal debate (Borgman, 2007; Kiesewetter, 2023; Willinsky, 2006). Rather than purely motivated by the collaborative pursuit of knowledge(s), these early journals – branded venues of learned societies, academies, and university presses – were also part of the Euro-centric consolidation of scientific power within privileged academic institutions and discourse communities. From the 19th century onwards, these journals were further intertwined with the notions of scholarly prestige, success, and distinction that scholars remain attached to today (be it for the sake of enhancing their careers, secure funding, or to elevate their standing within the academic community). The prestige, success, and distinction authors derived from publishing in these venues was intimately connected to the distinguished role the learned societies or universities that published their work played in the academic community. In a meritocratic system, where scholarly recognition was allocated based on individual achievements and the accrual of credentials, the competitive value gained by scholars by publishing in these journals, was intricately tied to liberal humanist ideas of original, singular, and possessive authorship. Here, the reputational gains for authors were closely linked to the ownership of their works, reflecting an intrinsic connection between the text, its

author, and the scholarly merit attributed to both (Fyfe et al., 2017; Kiesewetter, 2023; Moore, 2019).

Since the 1960s, commercial publishers such as Springer, Taylor & Francis, and Elsevier have incrementally expanded their control over the measures of academic prestige, success, and distinction. Aiming to position their own journals as legitimate platforms for high-quality research, these publishers started to adopt and centralise the editorial systems of earlier society and university publishers. First, they began to create new sub-disciplines by enlisting academics as editors, editorial board members, and importantly, referees, transitioning refereeing into what became widely recognised as ‘peer review’, as an evaluation and governance mechanism (Fyfe et al., 2017, Ross-Hellauer & Derrick, 2020). Secondly, proprietary editorial and workflow management software such as Aries Systems (owned by Elsevier) have been implemented to streamline manuscript submissions, align editing and peer review workflows, and automate formatting. Allegedly reducing the time from submission to publication and thus adding to the efficiency in the dissemination of research outputs, this software is promoted ‘as part of the “value” that they add to academic publishing’ (Fyfe et al., 2017: 12-13). Thirdly, the offer of these publishers has been completed by extra paid services leveraging metrics derived from the aggregation of citation data across numerous journals, which are used to evaluate the research impact of universities, the influence of specific publications, and the citation performance of individual researchers (Aspesi et al. 2019; Chen et al., 2019). These measures of academic prestige, success, and distinction are now marketed as key value-added services that form part of the offer of big publishers to provide cost- and time-efficient integrated solutions for managing, assessing, validating, and widely distributing academic outputs. This offer speaks to neoliberal research institutions around the globe that – often incentivised by governments – operate in competitive international markets.

As universities – not only in the UK but also internationally (Beigel, 2013; Beigel et al., 2018; Méndez Cota, 2020) – increasingly adopt measures of academic prestige, success, and distinction that are controlled and managed by a handful of large publishing companies, notions of prestige, success, and distinction have transformed significantly. Historically, for scholars, the benefit gained through publishing in a certain venue primarily consisted of the signposting of qualitative differentiation: this is, the distinction a scholar can achieve by entering certain – often very hermetic – disciplinary discourse communities and discussing their work with esteemed editors and referees, mostly peers. Now, venues have become markers in a hierarchical single market committed to the ranking of ‘being better’,

and not of being different (Knöchelmann, 2023). This is also true for humanities scholars for who publishing in high-ranking journals (central to the databases from which performance metrics are derived) is increasingly influencing their ability to secure funding and develop their careers (Knöchelmann, 2023; Schuh, 2009). As Fyfe et al observe, this is why, for UK academics, publishing their work outside prevalent publishing structures takes ‘significant moral courage (...) [because] [a]s long as prestige is associated with established journals (...) most academic publishing will continue to be done under the auspices of the big publishers’ (Fyfe et al., 2017, 16).

The alignment between notions of academic prestige, success, and distinction; publication metrics such as citation counts and journal prestige; and institutional performance management and evaluation systems, is also exemplified by the UK Research Excellence Framework (REF), designed to evaluate the quality of research within higher education institutions (Knöchelmann, 2023; McCulloch, 2017; REF2029, n.d.). The REF is an initiative by governmental higher education funding bodies (such as Research England and the Scottish Funding Council) and a result of government demands for university accountability and, in turn, universities’ demands on their staff.

As a humanities researcher academically (re-)socialised in a UK based institution, I am involved in discussions on and preparations for the REF as part of the university’s policies aimed at motivating their academic staff to generate work that is likely to achieve favourable REF evaluations (McCulloch, 2017). In contrast to the job market, in the framework of the REF, academics are not audited and assessed as individual scholars. Instead, should I be considered eligible for the REF, I would contribute my work to the productivity of my institution, Coventry University, and the research centre, the Centre for Postdigital Cultures, that I am affiliated to. Both would require the REF’s symbolic reward of my academic work not only to increase direct funding but also to improve their university rankings, influencing tuition revenue. Among other things, I would gain this reward through publishing ‘REF-able’ research outputs able to affirm Coventry University as a site of the production of world-leading research.

The prospect of the REF (the next exercise is planned for 2029), is the spectre hovering over my scholarly publishing everyday: will I be able to produce highly rated outputs until then? Will the text I am writing here be REF-able? Can I integrate guest-editing ‘Publishing after Progress’ into a REF-able practice-research submission? How

much time can I spend on 'Publishing after Progress' considering that my book (which still needs to be written) could be double-weighted (counted as two outputs) in the REF?

The evaluation of research output as part of the REF, as Knöchelmann (2023) writes, de-subjectivises research by rendering the researcher replaceable, as the focus is solely on how this output contributes to an university's productivity, its visibility, and its ability to attract students, staff, funding. Here, the value of scholarly work is judged predominantly by its utility, its power to generate economic benefits and symbolic reward. This pervasive utilitarian bias replicates a positivist humanist approach to scholarship where empirical evidence and measurable data are seen as the main tools for understanding the world. Consequently, knowledges (forms of thought, analysis, theorisation, and narration) are primarily valued for their practical applications and solutions, while knowledge practices (such as writing up research, editing, reviewing, and sharing) are reduced to mere auxiliary means in the production of quantifiable outputs. As a result of this evolvment – in which modern liberal humanist and positivist ideas that prioritise individual competitiveness and empirical validation are now embodied in performance metrics – academic progress is framed in terms of productivity, growth, data metrics, and international visibility.

In a publishing environment where measurable impacts – such as citation counts and readership figures – increasingly dictate the perceived value of academic work, as a scholar based in a UK institution, I remain firmly grounded on a historically established geo-epistemically privileged site of scientific knowledge-making. At the same time, as a humanities scholar – rooted in an epistemic tradition engaged in exploring situated, speculative, imaginary, or embodied forms of research that resist simple quantification due to their often 'niche' focus and limited readership, for example – I find myself increasingly relegated to a peripheral position in the hierarchy of symbolic and financial institutional and individual esteem and rewards acquired through high journal-rankings and article metrics.

As I have discussed in this section, academic publishing is increasingly centralised in the hands of a few commercial publishers while, at the same time, scholars remain attached to notions of scholarly prestige, success, and distinction that traditionally have been related to publishing their work in esteemed venues. In this context, the value of scholarly work is seen as a function of citation metrics enhanced by the efficient, streamlined, and broad dissemination of quantifiable research outputs – boosting both individual and institutional productivity. Consequently, measurable outputs that can be

monitored, tracked, and marketed for competitive advantage are seen as the primary indicators of prestige, success, and distinction in academia.

Suffering at Work: Authorial and Editorial Perspectives

In a capitalist system, markets are inherently designed to grow and productivity spawns more productivity. As I discuss in this section – through theoretical and personal reflections (not backing away from speculative hyperbole) – this mechanism boosts normative ideas about scholarly work, both authorial and editorial, that scholars remain attached to through traditional notions of prestige, success, and distinction. Additionally, I explore how this attachment affects scholarly identities, interpersonal dynamics, and emotional landscapes.

In a productivity-driven publishing system, as an author, I am expected to surrender to the entrenched market dynamics in academia, where my career advancement and institutional standing are heavily influenced by my ability to produce and publish (REF-able) research outputs regularly and proficiently. I am also urged to compete with others (also those that geo-epistemically are less fortunately positioned than myself) for measurable impact and citations. As an editor of an academic journal, I would perform a gatekeeping activity: as recent research about epistemic justice in scholarly publishing suggests, as part of this function, I might favour quantifiable and marketable research outputs that promise wide readership and high citation metrics (Albornoz et al., 2020; Chan et al., 2020; Mboa Nkoudou, 2020; Raju & Badrudeen, 2022). Additionally, I would face the challenges noted by Crane (2018) regarding the significant increase in journal submissions over recent decades, particularly in the humanities. In my engagement with editorial practices such as selection, organisation of peer review, and production, I would have to cope with the sheer volume of submissions. Last but not least, I would act as a steward for my fellow scholars' professional development, as each submission represents an academic heavily relying on the possibility to access high-status publication channels to advance their career through increased visibility and productivity.

While academics remain attached to traditional notions of prestige, success, distinction, and recognition, which are increasingly understood as outcomes of quantifiable achievements, the pressure to increase competitive productivity leads to a type of compulsive self-regulation. This self-management is partially imposed by the

structural conditions of the contemporary academic system – for example, the demands of the REF or hiring committees – rather than just being a voluntary adaptation (Ball, 2012; Churcher & Talbot, 2020 McCulloch, 2017). As various publishing scholars have underlined in this regard, the heightened pressures in their work environment are altering the social relationships and interactions among academics. Instead of fostering collaboration and community, these relationships are increasingly viewed and utilised merely as tools to secure publications, citations, and personal achievements (Adema, 2021; Moore, 2019; Thoburn & Thurston, 2023). As research on academic audit and output cultures shows, scholarly activities are progressively reoriented towards those which are likely to have a positive impact on measurable outcomes (Ball, 2012; Churcher & Talbot, 2020 McCulloch, 2017).

At the same time, prevailing productivity and visibility metrics pressure scholars to deflect attention away from the subjective, situated, and relational aspects of their intellectual, social, and emotional development that have no immediate measurable value. For example, activities such as writing an article become dissociated from the everyday social interactions that often stand at their actual basis – be it informal conversations with other academics or friends, or dialogues as part of editorial assessments such as peer review (Fitzpatrick, 2011). Similarly, under the pressure to produce measurable outputs efficiently, some scholars move away from creative, non-utilitarian intellectual endeavours such as experimentation or speculation for the sake of intellectual curiosity (Adema, 2021; Kiesewetter, 2023). Others adjust their research topics, methodologies, and writing styles to conform more closely to what is deemed measurable and citable within the prevailing positivist frameworks (Chan et al., 2020; Mboa Nkoudou, 2020 McCulloch, 2017).

Marcel Knöchelmann (2023) provides empirical data on some of the psychological effects of the compulsive self-regulation humanities scholars engage in. Among UK researchers in the humanities, adapting to increasing productivity rates reinforces longer work hours, stress, and anxiety, while high levels of competition are perceived by many UK humanities scholars as significantly contributing to unkind and aggressive research cultures. Additionally, he observes that scholars increasingly become alienated from their work, as it becomes a means for competition rather than serving as a foundation for interpersonal engagement, qualitative negotiation and appreciation. According to Knöchelmann's research, early-career and female academics disproportionately and more acutely experience these psychological effects than their more established, male

colleagues. While the data do not reveal the effects on other marginalised groups within UK academia – for example, scholars from non-Western backgrounds, LGBTQIA communities, and persons with disabilities – it can be expected that these groups experience similar or potentially exacerbated challenges due to intersecting biases and structural inequalities.

Additionally, scholars may not only face stress and anxiety but also identity conflicts: these include feeling frustration and inadequacy due to misalignment between institutional expectations, publishing requirements, personal and scholarly values, and intellectual pursuits. This tension is compounded by a growing concern among critical humanities scholars about the meaning and scope of their knowledges and knowledge practices and their agency in shaping them – beyond the efficient production of quantifiable research outputs (Ball, 2012; Kiesewetter, 2023, 2024).

The philosopher Millicent Churcher and the education studies scholar Debra Talbot observe that – as part of the de-subjectivation effects in research under current audit, evaluation, and output regimes – ‘emotion is perceived as inimical to the rational instrumentalisation’ of research in sake of productivity (2020: 35). For example, they assert that stress, insecurity, frustration, or anxiety are (often implicitly) regarded unsuitable, troublesome, and weak. Openly admitting to these emotions can have negative consequences on how a scholar’s professionalism is perceived by peers or assessment boards and may also adversely impact this scholar’s career prospects. The way in which emotions are seen as obstacles to performance efficiency stems from a long-standing dichotomy in Western thought that associates rationality with objectivity and control, and emotion with subjectivity and unpredictability (Ahmed, 2004; Anzaldúa, 1987; Harding, 2002).

With little chance of a larger, systemic transformation in research and higher education environments in the UK, Churcher and Talbot suggest that ‘academics who are further and further estranged from the nature of their work may be drawn to look outside the sphere of their employment to recover a sense of joy, purpose, and meaning’ (2020: 39). However, the work of Christophe Dejours – focusing on the existential relationship between work, psychological well-being, self-esteem, and identity – suggests otherwise. He emphasises the importance of resisting de-subjectivising (and de-humanising) work conditions that can diminish personal agency and mental health, rendering work meaningless and alienating. Dejours argues that, instead of seeking fulfilment solely outside their professional environments, individuals and communities can actively be involved

in confronting and reshaping the systemic and institutional conditions that lead to suffering at work. For example, they can do so by resisting organisational practices that treat individuals as mere cogs in a productivity machine, while reshaping their roles to foster a sense of personal agency and meaning.

As I discussed in this section, the way in which traditional notions of scholarly prestige, success, and distinction have become interrelated with productivity and visibility metrics, has normativising effects on academic authorship and editorship. For example, authors face pressure to generate outputs regularly and efficiently, competing with others for publications and citations for career advancement. Editors, as part of their traditional gatekeeping functions, increasingly also act as stewards of the professional progress of their fellow scholars, who are relying on the possibility to access high-status publication channels, visibility, and citation metrics to advance their career. Under these systemic pressures on academic work, scholars engage with forms of self-regulation that shift the focus away from the subjective, contextual, and interpersonal dimensions of their labour, which lack direct quantifiable impact, rendering them inconsequential. These adaptations for the sake of higher productivity create stress and anxiety among researchers, while also leading to feelings of alienation, loss of meaning and agency in work. These emotions are often considered as irrelevant, even disruptive, in current competitive and productivity-driven institutional regimes.

In the remainder of this article, I take Dejours' provocation to actively address the systemic and institutional factors that contribute to suffering at work as an opportunity to reflect on my own work and self-understanding as a guest editor – and gatekeeper – of 'Publishing after Progress'. My exploratory editorial praxis starts from the assumption that I, as a scholar subjectivised in a competitive, metrics-driven academic system, underscored by positivist and liberal humanist ideals of modern progress, still hold an active role in this system, as well as in the institution I form part of, and bear a certain responsibility for them as they structure my working environment, my interactions with fellow academics, and my psychological wellbeing.

This responsibility then, for me, is not (just) about alleviating suffering and finding joy (including my own) in neoliberal academic environments by contributing to researchers' wellbeing (and thus, it can be expected, ultimately, their productivity). It also is not a nostalgic attempt to 'undo' neoliberal progress narratives by 'rescuing' a 'pre-neoliberal' 'intrinsic' humanities ethos that – by perpetuating exclusion from discourse communities – has

contributed towards fuelling modern narratives of scientific progress, or progressive science, as individual and in competition with others (Alatas, 2000; Harding, 2002; Smith 1999). Rather, I consider it as my responsibility to, through editing otherwise, intervene into the way scholarly work is administered by creating conditions under which thinking (and doing) ‘Publishing after Progress’ becomes possible, or at least plausible. Especially as a creative, non-utilitarian, collaborative, and agency-sustaining – hopefully also joy- and meaningful – undertaking beyond the immediate demands of a productivity-driven academic environment that renders these significant dimensions of academic work inconsequential. Following Martin Savransky (2021), I want to insist on the ‘perhaps’, the ‘dim intensity of a minor opening (...) [that] designates the insistence of an otherwise in the midst of a situation (...) but does not say what the answers to the problem should be’.

Exploring Editing Otherwise: *Culture Machine*

As I discuss in this section, it is not by coincidence that my insistence on a ‘perhaps’ finds its outlet in an issue of the scholar-led open access journal *Culture Machine*. For more than twenty years, *Culture Machine* has established its academic prestige largely outside an economic logic of quantification, measurement and efficiency.ⁱ Taking on the guest-editorship for the special issue ‘Publishing after Progress’, I followed the generous invitation of Gabriela Méndez Cota – one of the principal editors of *Culture Machine*, co-contributor of the issue, collaborator, colleague, and friend. I met Gabriela a couple of years ago, we were introduced by Gary Hall, who is the director of the Centre for Postdigital Cultures at Coventry University and a co-director of Open Humanities Press which features *Culture Machine* in their programme. This kind of coterie does not have the best reputation in academia (and often rightly so). However, it also stands as a specific and partial testament to the collaborations turning into friendships, the conversations turning into practices, the critical debates turning into situated experiences that are existential dimensions of professional life but are increasingly deemed nonconsequential under current audit, evaluation, and output regimes.

Founded in 1999, *Culture Machine* is a ‘series of experiments in culture and theory (...) [seeking out and promoting] scholarly work that engages provocatively with contemporary technical objects, processes and imaginaries from the North and South (...) [building on an] open ended, non-goal orientated, exploratory and experimental approach to critical theory’ (Open Humanities Press, n.d.). Gabriela Méndez Cota, in an early draft of her contribution to

this special issue co-authored with Roger Magazine, insisted that ‘*Culture Machine* was never about scholarly communication, open access publishing, performance evaluation, or anything else. Beneath the aboutness (...) it was always a new beginning for scholarship in the very cracks of the University Culture Machine’. How do I, as a guest editor of this issue, go about creating the conditions for such a new beginning – merely a ‘perhaps’ designating ‘the insistence of an otherwise in the midst of a situation (...) but does not say what the answers to the problem should be’ (Savransky, 2021)?

The ‘Prospectus’ of the second issue of *Culture Machine* helps to approach this question. Written in 2000, it remains programmatic with respect to the intellectual, political, and ethical conjuncture *Culture Machine* is situated in and, at the same time, opens out from this conjuncture. Titled ‘The University Culture Machine’, the issue in which the ‘Prospectus’ was published embodies a responsibility for and commitment to keep thinking ‘about the university’ and to do so:

[B]y refusing to be confined to disciplines, or disciplinarity, or even by a normative notion of interdisciplinarity ... if the humanities are to have a future at all in a world progressively dominated by an economic logic of profit and loss, it must consist in an experimental opening toward heterogeneity, an opening which can never be conclusive or contained (Culture Machine, 2000).

This statement roots *Culture Machine* in critical humanities discourses, especially also in the context of UK cultural studies, that have been committed to engagements with the discourse on cultural hegemony (Wright, 2003). Cultural studies’ closeness to (post-)structuralism, Marxism, post-Marxism, and, more recently, intersectional and posthumanist feminism – specifically to considerations of the constitutive nature of power relations, the intrinsic antagonism of the social, and the role of universities as places of knowledge creation, loci of ‘identities in formation’, and emergent sites of alternative social, political, and economic (re)organisation and praxis of scholarship – has pushed cultural studies scholars to look at and question their own relation to and involvement with hegemonic power (Kiesewetter, 2023). This has led, at least within some disciplinary instances, to an understanding of cultural studies scholarship as an intrinsic part of a continuous engagement with the university itself, in relation to academic authority and institutional legitimacy, and in relation to its own disciplinarity and every-day practices (Hall, 2002; Hall, 1996; Weber, 2000).

Cultural studies, like any other discipline, has been subject to its own stabilisation and institutionalisation, for example within a specific normative leftist or democratic politics, with corresponding practices, values, and ethics, or as part of a liberal humanist or neoliberal framework of scholarship. As Gary Hall (2002, 2008) stresses, cultural studies, in the early days of its emergence, had a strong self-reflexive, experimental, and speculative aspect. However, this aspect was often closed down in the later understandings of cultural studies that were dominant in the 1980s and 1990s accompanied by a critical impetus firmly positioned in a pre-decided liberal left politics and its ethics and morals, rather than remaining open to experimentation and speculation.

Tony Bennett (1998) describes this inherent ‘cultural studies antagonism’ (between institutionalisation and experimentation (as a movement away from institutionalisation)) by referring to cultural studies as a ‘reluctant discipline’. Simon O’Sullivan (2002) notes that experimentation antagonistically and perpetually creates new lines of flight (out of, or away from, its own disciplinarisation and institutionalisation). And Janneke Adema (2015) proposes cultural studies ‘as a pragmatic experimental program moving away from stability, affirming cultural studies as a critical process, as a doing’ which is open to ambivalence, uncertainty, risk, and, with that, open to a plurality of possible outcomes (2015: 174). As O’Sullivan writes, experimentation recognises the inherent multiplicity of worlds inside its own:

At stake in these experiments is the accessing of other worlds. Not worlds “beyond” this one (no transcendent, nor utopian principle) but worlds (...) immanent in this one (...). Indeed, cultural studies is also about locating (...) allies, these anomalies that stalk the fringes (...) [I]ndeed this project might be best characterised as ethical. In as much as it involves exploring the potential for becoming – the potential for self-overcoming (2002: 92).

A scholarly politics-and/as-praxis-and/as-ethics, in this context, then, is, as Hall (2008) remarks, always situated and partial, as it is adhering ‘to the pragmatic demands of each particular, finite conjunction of the “here” and “now”, whatever and wherever it may be’ (201), while hinging upon the exposure to and encounter with the ‘singularity of the other’ (Hall, 2008, 202) – whoever or whatever this other may be. Such a politics-and/as-praxis-and/as-ethics for Hall requires an acknowledgement of the possibility that the “here” and “now” may change us and our politics’ (2008: 202). Only like this, so he argues, it is possible to conceive of politics-and/as-praxis-and/as-ethics as

something ‘that does not conform to the political vocabularies and frameworks of interpretation that are already transcendently decided in advance’ (2008: 202).

Such a scholarly politics-and/as-praxis-and/as-ethics, in the context of *Culture Machine*, can not and does not remain in the about, the mere theoretical abstraction, the distant and seemingly objective representation. However, this is not to say that *Culture Machine* is anti-theoretical or against theoretical rigour. Rather, as Hall (2004) writes in issue 6 of *Culture Machine*: theory and politics are inseparable. Their interplay is important not just for analysis but for, in a more affirmative and performative sense, committing to actively creating new organisational structures, institutions, and spaces for experimenting with a scholarly politics-and/as-praxis-and/as-ethics in ways that transcend traditional frameworks.

Against this background, my aim – to intervene into the way scholarly work is administered by editing otherwise, creating the conditions under which thinking (and doing) ‘Publishing after Progress’ becomes possible as a creative, non-utilitarian, collaborative, and agency-sustaining undertaking – is one that perpetually grapples with the (im)possibility of a politics of engagement in scholarship in, and beyond, an academic system in which scholarly work is seen as a function of citation metrics and the efficient production of research outputs. The nature of this intervention, its politics, and the conditions it brings forward can only be provisory and tentative. These efforts are inherently collaborative, as they are situated in the manifold, transient, and shapeshifting social constellations and relations (of invited guest editors, authors, and reviewers, for example) intersecting anew in every issue of *Culture Machine*.

I approach editing otherwise by risking to take seriously *Culture Machine*’s commitment to a non-conclusive ‘opening toward heterogeneity’ (*Culture Machine*, 2000), which is always also an opening ‘out from’ (Kember, 2014). This includes a move beyond the intellectual, political, and ethical conjuncture *Culture Machine* is situated in and the potential closures it might enact through its own formation, establishment, and institutionalisation as a reputational scholarly journal. For example, the repeated critique of cultural studies as failing ‘to represent and include certain marginalised groups and to begin to indicate what cultural studies [or the university] might look like if it did include those voices and perspectives’ (Wright, 2003: 812); or the merely theoretical affirmation of a move away from liberal humanism as a nostalgic lip service to its essential collaborative, horizontal, and open ethos. I do approach editing otherwise while being aware of my own enclosures:

for example, in the open access discourse which is one of the privileged sites in which the future of publishing is discussed; from my own academic (re-)socialisation in the Anglo-European humanities; as well as in my own attachments to traditional notions of scholarly prestige, success, and distinction (after all, ‘there is obviously a certain amount of academic credit to be gained from producing an issue of *Culture Machine*’ (Culture Machine, 2000)).

How can I – in resonance with the interventionist perspective of *Culture Machine* and its commitment to critical discourses on cultural hegemony in (post-)structuralism, Marxism, post-Marxism, and, more recently, intersectional and posthumanist feminism – attune my editorial gatekeeping role and practice to this heterogeneity? What modes of scholarly subjectivity, agency, and meaning – what ‘worlds (...) immanent in this one’ (O’Sullivan, 2002: 92) – might (re)emerge from my exploratory and experimental approach that the efficient, streamlined, and broad dissemination of research outputs in the service of competitive metrics tends to overlook or has rendered inconsequential?

Again, this reflection must be specific, in so far as it can only be approached within the situated and relational node formed through the temporary entanglements of a variety of knowledge creating actors coalescing around the shared preoccupation with the topic ‘Publishing after Progress’. The contributions and contributors assembled in this issue share, in various ways, the tentative and interventionist politics of my own editorial undertaking in ‘Publishing after Progress’. Some of their titles bear witness to this: Valeria Mussio’s ‘Tus libros y poemas bailan y se besan en Internet: Matrerita, la edición digital y su potencialidad para emancipar cuerpos en peligro’,ⁱⁱ Anja Groten’s ‘Designing sideways. Inefficient publishing as mode of refusal’, or Roger Magazine’s and Gabriela Méndez Cota’s ‘Reverse Scholarship as Solidarity after Progress’.

Hence, I develop my considerations from an unstable ground: one of involvement and remove. Remove because, by – at least to a certain extent – making legible the specificities of my engagement, I want to encourage editors, peer reviewers, and authors to, within their own spheres of influence, induce a crack in hegemonic academic publishing cultures in order to engage differently, perhaps more diligently, with the cultivation of collaborative conditions that prioritise personal agency and meaningful engagement over mere productivity metrics. Involvement, because I do not want to operationalise the contributions assembled in this special issue for the sake of this aim. With this in mind, and considering that the editorial process is still ongoing while I write these words, I will do so via a

series of short vignettes providing brief, evocative accounts of observations during the process and my personal experience. These vary in length and depth, and meander between involvement and attempted detachment.

Editorial Echoes: An Incomplete Account

Travels

Winter 2023. Ways an open call travels: through a website, mailing lists, social media. Beyond the open access and open science discourses as the privileged sites in which the future of academic publishing is debated (and shaped). Through and beyond my own, late, socialisation in the theoretical-abstraction-heavy Anglo-European humanities. Towards the social practices by which individuals and communities – inside and outside of academia – have started to radically contextualise their experience of living and working in a ‘world after progress’ marked by humanitarian and planetary emergencies. Towards Spanish-Italian-German and the many-Englishes-there-are. Through people I know (friends, collaborators). People I don’t know but whose work I admire. People emerging along the way (through recommendations, conversations, coincidences).

Tentative openings. Firmly rooted in the specificity of my own position, my editor-curator-author-translator-proofreader-ship too. Effectuating closures.

(Aparicio & Blaser, 2008; Culture Machine, 2023; Keating, 2013; Leyva Solano, 2023)

Confluence

Publishing after Progress: my own discomfort and suffering with being in academia, becoming in academia, becoming myself in academia, through writing and publishing: or rather, through writing about writing and publishing about publishing. An unwieldy confluence of the means through which I strive to gain academic credentials and the ones I strive to up ‘the ration of escape over capture’ (Massumi, 2018: 68).

Discomfort and suffering as a gravitational force field. Technocapitalism and its devastating effects on sociotechnical and naturecultural environments, beings, things. Discomfort(s) as a node around which connected, loosely connected, not-yet-connected

individuals, collectives, technologies, discourses, fears, angers, hopes rub against each other, coalesce, touch, splinter.

The objectives, struggles, knowledges, and knowledge practices of activist, artistic, and academic authors from Argentina, Belgium, Mexico, the Netherlands, the UK, the US, and Switzerland intersecting – through their writing and publishing – within the same political domain, or ‘problem space’ (Lury, 2021), the preoccupation with the (im)possibilities of publishing towards (and in) a world ‘after Progress’. Different shades of a tentative insurrectional (publishing) praxis responding to contemporary conditions of crisis, struggle, and suffering by publishing differently.

The objectives, struggles, knowledges, and knowledge practices of peer reviewers from Argentina, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Portugal, the Netherlands, the UK, and the US intersecting within the same political domain, or ‘problem space’ (Lury, 2021). More shades of a tentative insurrectional (publishing) praxis responding to contemporary conditions of crisis, struggle, and suffering by publishing differently.

Publishing after Progress ‘may not cure our brokenness, but that is only because we are incurable, or to put it another way, our cura, our care, can never be of the self, but only of that touch, that rub, that press, that kinky tangle of our incomplete sharing’ (Stefano Harney and Fred Moten in conversation with Yolli Gómez Alvarado, Juan Pablo Anaya, Luciano Concheiro, Cristina Rivera Garza, and Aline Hernández, 2018)

Your strategy of resistance to both acculturating and inculturating pressures?

A pragmatics of collective imagination against ongoing desolation?

Going a part of the way together.

(Anzaldúa, 2002; Savransky, 2021)

A Peer Reviewer

I do feel increasingly that any kind of critical thinking and engagement comes with suffering, not least because of the habits we develop of questioning, of challenging etc.. But persevere we must even as we learn to take care of ourselves better and work as a community. I so relate to what you say about existential questions –

it is hard to deal with the banality of the everyday when those dominate our thoughts.

An Emergent Sociability

Publishing after Progress, an emergent sociability, a fugitive social energy.

Publishing after Progress does not know certainties. It resists answers, formalisations, and programmatic abstractions. It cannot be pinned down. It refuses to be situated: in societies, cultures, fixed identities, disciplines, regions, histories of ideas.

Publishing after Progress is not what comes before, concomitant, or after capitalism and modernity in their many terrifying (and terrifyingly appealing) shapes. Publishing after Progress is not nostalgically looking back. It doesn't look forward in hope. It multiplies the present through crafting, sharing, and performing possibilities of doing publishing otherwise that intensify and dramatise once connected.

Publishing after Progress does not exist beyond the specific situated constellations it occurs in.

Publishing after Progress does not exist outside of this issue. Yet, it is brought into existence everywhere.

(Harney & Moten, 2013; Savransky, 2021; Thurston & Thoburn, 2023)

Tuning Up

How to strengthen elements of an emerging sociability without closing it down by enacting – as editor, as peer reviewer, as copyeditor – knowledge-practices which are at odds with this emerging sociability?

(Colectivo Situaciones, 2007)

Listening

How to pay attention?

Learning the political art of listening. Listening is consequential. It might change me, you, us, them, it, the in-between-through-beyond-me-you-us-them-it.

(Coles, 2004; Casas-Cortés et al., 2013; Raibmon, 2018; Thoburn & Thurston, 2023)

Lack of Standard Prestige Measures

Sorry (...) I missed your earlier message. I am getting a lot of messages from predatory journals, and it is hard to find the interesting stuff (a reviewer).

Realmente creo que es posible criticar un texto sin ensañarse o ser destructivx. Y parto de ahí porque no puedo dissociar mi escritura académica de mí misma. Yo todavía no me fui aunque sí dan ganas (de la academia, aunque ¿qué es quedarse o estar adentro? jaja!), en todo caso la veo como un espacio a disputar – como otros. Ojalá más personas y revistas empiecen a reflexionar sobre estas cuestiones (a reviewer).ⁱⁱⁱ

Cambiare il modo di valutare, aggiungendo (e non sottraendo) più componente umana, può essere un modo per trasformare le nostre istituzioni di ricerca. In fondo leggere un *paper* è un atto che ci confina in una forma che non è più sufficiente a rappresentare la complessità di una ricerca contemporanea. E vederci di più, interagire di più, confrontarci di più – se necessario anche scontrarci – può essere un modo per sottrarci tutti all’abbraccio mortale delle macchine che oggi minacciano di automatizzare tutte le fasi della ricerca, trasferendo sugli algoritmi i *bias* del sistema che li ha progettati. È questo probabilmente l’ennesimo stratagemma del potere – certo il più insidioso – per oscurare definitivamente le proprie tracce e responsabilità (a reviewer).^{iv}

Practices of Exteriority and Superiority

Common practices of ‘exteriority and superiority’ (Bozalek et al., 2019) (an incomplete list):

Editorial and workflow management systems adding distance between texts, their authors, their editors, their reviewers.

Streamlined workflows effectively closing ‘the author out of the main chronology of the conversation, which instead becomes a backchannel discussion between the reviewer and the editor’ (Fitzpatrick, 2011: 28).

The unacknowledged power (and entitlement) of reviewers (and journal editors who act as gatekeepers) in proposing whether manuscripts are accepted or rejected.

Practices of anonymity in peer review. Reasonably implemented to prevent bias with respect to gender, nationality, institutional affiliation, and academic status (Knöchelmann, 2021; Krlev & Spicer 2023; Ross-Hellauer, 2017). Essentialising, objectivising, moralising, dismissing, slamming, disrespecting, destroying – how easy this is from a distance (are you getting off on it?).

Open Peer Review

An experiment in open peer review, risking it, an open ended quest, in its infancy, not a miracle cure certainly. And yet. A mutually enriching, intellectually stimulating and productive dialogue rather than a unilateral judgment issued from the position of (technologically mediated) authority?

A proposition (a weirdly prescriptive, mildly preposterous protocol, not without flaws). Stripping down what cannot be formalised (in an attempt to give it shape):

Write up a document specifying the peer review process, its rationale, involvement, basic deadlines, as well as reviewer guidelines (Culture Machine, 2024a):

Inform the authors early on (via email). Bear in mind that open peer review is not common in academia and that some authors might not have had a lot of experience with academic procedures at all. Share the peer reviewing document. Ask for consent (emphasising that anonymity could also be provided should authors wish so (no one did)). Give the possibility to suggest potential reviewers.

Select peer reviewers, two per contribution. How to facilitate mutually enriching conversations that are intellectually stimulating and productive for everyone involved (including the texts)? How to encourage affirmative discussions, critique, and negotiations that can stretch disciplinary and intellectual boundaries? How can reviewers and authors share cognitive landscapes, vernaculars that resonate, while not rendering invisible the specific historical, cultural, and social contexts that shape the understandings and experiences of living and working in in the ‘world after progress’ they are emerging from?

Invite peer reviewers (via email): sharing the peer-review guidelines, a short abstract of the contributions to review, inviting them to share their feedback openly once the process is completed.

Introduce authors and reviewers (via email). Specify timelines (a month from now). Leave the nature of the process open to be dialogically decided between authors and reviewers (preferred languages, preferred mode of feedback, preferred technologies supporting interaction).

As an editor, bow out of the process, while remaining present for support and accompaniment and accountable in case of doubts, struggles, domineering or intrusive behaviours.

Value

Reviewer guidelines: please answer the following questions clearly and thoughtfully, considering they will form the basis of your exchange with the authors. Based on your expertise and critical position, what do you expect this special issue to accomplish in relation to its call for papers on ‘Publishing after Progress’? How does this article relate to the topic, how does it contribute to the special issue’s scope? What could be done to amend, develop, and expand the argument made in this article in relation to the topic, according to your stated expectations of what the issue should accomplish? Please make sure to always justify and argue your comments and feedback (Culture Machine, 2024a).

Attending to the relational entanglements between reviewers, authors, texts, and the ideas produced in the process of reading and writing, trying to prevent hierarchisation or equalisations. Transforming the capacities of reviewers, reviewees, and the texts themselves: texts as actors (rather than merely products) facilitating encounters, negotiations, mutual influences, contagions (Culture Machine, 2024b).

Seeing the question of value and relevance as immanent to the specific relational constellations – of topics, problems, texts, actors, environments large and small – in which knowledge and knowledge practices come to matter.

(Barad, 2007; Bozalek et al., 2019; Haraway, 1997; Savransky, 2016)

Timekeeping

Letting an initial schedule implode.

Different paces of writing, of reviewing, different lives; the time thoughtful and careful engagement takes; the messiness of collaboration; the quest for a relational ethics, language, sensitivity; winter storms, summer heat, crying babies, crowded flats, insect bites, moving countries, changing jobs, losing jobs, illnesses, losses and pains; despair over-in-through-the-world-and-academia; the not-enough-ness, the inadequacy, of it all; the too-muchness of too many: commitments, deadlines, conferences, demands, admin tasks.

An annually published journal: stretching, bending, bulking, shifting, re-shifting, recessing until there's nowhere left to shift towards. Temporary closure.

Editing I (after progress?)

Looking at this almost finished special issue, I see a weaving pattern – threadbare here, thickening there; dark snarls, smooth patches, fraying at the edge, disintegrating already, piecing itself together and apart. Tender and pliable, coarse and erucative, rebellious and headstrong. With bristles, twigs, and thorns sticking out.

No limpiemos el canon. no limpiemos el proceso, no limpiemos el resultado.

(Anzaldúa, 1987; Xochitl Leyva Solanos in conversation with Gabriela Méndez Cota and Rebekka Kiesewetter, Spring 2024)

Editing II

Editing is(as) can be what binds us together and apart.

Editing as(is) can be facilitation. Making possible (or at least plausible) the collaborative work of resisting (and undoing) transactional encounters and streamlined communication 'within a publishing culture as an aesthetic regime that disguises its political role, focusing instead on a seemingly emotionless presentation that, in reality, aestheticizes political experiences' (Thoburn & Thurston, 2023). Rendering the seemingly inconsequential consequential, rather than negating it or regarding it as deficiency in need to be remediated in the sake of the efficient communication of research outputs. Attending to, bearing with, and holding space for emotions, everyday feelings, affects. The conflict and messiness in it all affecting the editorial practices, workflows, and timelines.

Editing as(is) can be a listening, translation, and weaving praxis of sorts: between the nodes in a networked reality. The listening bit: attentively tuning into other peoples' ways of life, experiences, and expressions, maybe finding commonalities between different worlds. The translation bit: translating them into a different framework, the *Culture Machine* framework, my own framework to be clear. The weaving bit: insisting (trying to insist) on a respectful exchange honouring diverse and distinct unique historical, cultural, and social contexts, recognising how these differences shape relationships and practices.

Editing as(is) can be not all rainbows and unicorns. It's the excrescence of administrative labour, of unpaid labour; it's excessive communication; it's the tightrope walk of not passing on stress to others; it's fucking with my OCD, my head, my life.

(Casas-Cortés et al., 2013; Brown, 2021; Taylor, 2019; Thoburn & Thurston, 2023)

Accounting / Reckoning

A 1000 pains. When sharing responsibility feels like losing control. The awkwardness of taking back control. The difficulty of finding reviewers. Seeing my summer holidays disappearing (the delays!). The pain of losing contributors and contributions on the way. The sleepless nights. The writers block. The anxiety. The impostor syndrome. The too many cigarettes. The impossibility to detach myself (which self?).

A 1001 joys. The encounters. The conversations. The generosity. Relations old, new, renewed. Affecting and being affected. Recognition beyond differences. Feeling less lonely.

What do you struggle with, who do you struggle for?

And now?

Let it go, travel, contaminate.

Conclusion

In this article I have examined how – within the current metrics-driven governance of scholarship, where quantifiable output is prioritised – publishing has become predominantly a tool for demonstrating the visibility and productivity of research institutions and scholars. Visibility and productivity increasingly function as shortcuts for traditional notions of academic prestige, success, and

distinction. This evolution furthers normative ideas of scholarly – both authorial and editorial – work with a focus on efficiency and competition. Under systemic and institutional pressures, scholars engage in self-regulating behaviours that neglect the subjective, contextual, and interpersonal aspects of their work. These adaptations, aimed at increasing productivity and competitive advantage, often lead to stress, anxiety, feelings of alienation and loss of meaning among researchers – emotional responses that are often viewed as unimportant within competitive and productivity-driven academic institutions.

Culture Machine has established its reputation largely outside an economic logic of measurement, efficiency, and competitiveness. Rather – from its critical standpoint on cultural hegemony and its closeness to (post-)structuralism, Marxism, post-Marxism, and, more recently, intersectional and posthumanist feminism – it facilitates the engagement in collaborative, situated, and open-ended experiments that critically challenge the boundaries and norms of scholarly institutions, traditional scholarship, scholarly politics, and praxis.

In the intellectual tradition of *Culture Machine*, I have tentatively approached my own editorship of the special issue ‘Publishing after Progress’ as an intervention into the way scholarly work is administered under current audit, evaluation, and output regimes. I have done so through an understanding of this issue as a space for heterogeneity, with an eye on facilitating the collaborative, non-utilitarian, and agency-sustaining processes and practices that might be enabled by it, while trying to remain committed to intellectual rigour and critical responsibility. If the focus and self-understanding in editing – as gatekeeping – shifts from excluding from discourse (be it via qualitative or quantitative differentiation) towards enabling discourse through nurturing meaningful relationships, experiences, and reflections among diverse knowledge producing actors, then editorial workflows will need to also undergo significant transformations.

The account of my experience editing the special issue ‘Publishing after Progress’, as outlined in the previous section of this article, stands as an unfinished, particular, partial, situated, and by no means prescriptive (or above all doubt) testament of these transformations.

The open call for submissions – an explicit invitation towards knowledge producers situated outside the privileged sites in which the future of academic publishing is discussed (for example, outside open access and open science discourses, or even outside of academia) – was a first deliberate step in creating an editorial

environment where varied engagements could temporarily intersect and resonate within the same political domain, challenging conventional epistemic hierarchies and exclusivities within academic publishing (Culture Machine, 2023).

The experiment with implementing an open peer review process embodied a tentative approach to critically address some concerns and questions raised by the academic community about the common standards and parameters of as well as the negative behaviours potentially enticed by (double-blind) peer review as an expert guarantee of scholarly quality, relevance, or value. Devising and implementing an open peer review process, I sought to make interactions between authors and reviewers more transparent, horizontal, collaborative, and tailored to the diverse perspectives, realities, needs, and potentials of all participants involved in the review in an attempt at increasing their agency and the meaning they derived from this process. Key to this was how authors and reviewers, via email, were invited to ‘customise’ their interactions. For example, they chose their preferred feedback modalities, languages, and communication technologies, which often resulted in layered, multi-channel exchanges. Additionally, the reviewer guidelines (Culture Machine, 2024a), shared with authors and reviewers early on in the editorial process, attempted to reframe the notion of value in scholarly knowledge and knowledge practice to foster a more situated sense of belonging and meaning in academic work. Specifically, it suggested that the value of contributions should be viewed as intrinsic to the specific contexts (of topics, problems, and actors, for example) in which they come to matter, rather than as determined top-down by falsely universalising evaluation criteria and reductionist metrics.

Responsively adapting editorial workflows and timelines to accommodate the diverse circumstances and the different epistemic, social, and emotional realities of the contributors was another crucial aspect of the editorial process. This, not least, exemplified an attempt to render existential elements of professional life and creativity consequential, while mitigating the stress and anxiety occurring in an increasingly pressurised, competitive academic environment.

I need to acknowledge here too that my ambition to continuously adapt the editorial workflow and timelines – as well the ‘overcommunication’ with authors and editors to make the process and these adaptations transparent and comprehensible – put strains on me as a guest-editor of this special issue. This included managing intense periods of stress and uncertainty amidst other non-*Culture-Machine*-related commitments; the anxiety over my ability to see ‘Publishing after Progress’ through until its release amidst shifting

timelines; and the emotional turmoil due to the misalignment and existential entanglement of institutional expectations (for example, creating REF-able outputs), my personal, and scholarly values, and my intellectual-practical pursuits.

Culture Machine – as an academic journal situated in an environment in which progress is framed in terms of productivity and international visibility, while scholars remain attached to traditional notions of prestige, success, and distinction – can by no means be set completely apart from existing systemic expectations and pressures. However, a journal such as *Culture Machine* bears the potential to constitute a site, among many others, in which it becomes possible to insist on a ‘perhaps’, an ‘otherwise in the midst of a situation’ (Savransky, 2021). Something that transcends the limitations of what one believes (and is advised) is achievable, prestigious, and valuable within dominant academic publishing regimes, and academia more widely.

In this context, I invite editors, peer reviewers, and authors to challenge themselves: to seek out and foster these minor openings within their own spheres of influence, its limitations, and possibilities; to – within their editorial commitments, their peer review duties, and their authorship – cultivate conditions that prioritise scholarly agency, meaningful engagement, and emotional support over mere productivity metrics; to take to heart Toni Morrison’s (2019) instruction to dream a little before they think – all the while knowing that this dream might turn out to be a nightmare, or, at least, a strenuous undertaking.

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End Notes

ⁱ For more information on the scholar- and community-led open access ecosystem *Culture Machine* forms a part of, see the articles by Sarah Kember and Jeff Pooley in this special issue that discuss this ecosystem as an alternative to competitive, efficiency-, and productivity-driven agendas in scholarly publishing.

ⁱⁱ Your books and poems dance and kiss on the Internet: Matrerita, digital publishing and its potential to emancipate bodies in danger. (My own translation into English)

ⁱⁱⁱ I truly believe it is possible to critique a text without being harsh or destructive. And I start from there because I cannot dissociate my academic writing from myself. I haven't left academia yet, although the desire is there (but then, what does it mean to stay or be inside? haha!), in any case, I see it as a space to be contested – like others. I hope more people and journals start to reflect on these issues. (My own translation into English)

^{iv} Changing the way we evaluate, adding (not subtracting) the human component, can be a way to potentially transform our research institutions. After all, reading and writing a paper is an act that confines us to a form that is no longer adequate to represent the

complexity of the contemporary research experience. And seeing each other more, interacting more, confronting each other more – if necessary, even conflicting – may be a way to escape from the deadly embrace of the machines that now threaten to automate all phases of research, transferring onto the algorithms the biases of the system that designed them. This is probably the ultimate stratagem of power – certainly the most insidious – to permanently obfuscate its traces and responsibilities.