Reverse Scholarship as Solidarity After Progress

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Is there a universal consensus among scholars regarding what counts as 'progress' in scholarly quality assessment through academic publishing? While consensus among scholars seems unlikely given the diversity of contexts and disciplines in which scholarship takes place, the higher education institutions on which most scholars depend, increasingly agree upon neoliberal understandings of academic publishing as research output that commands global visibility. Such understandings of publishing privilege the quantification and ranking of *individual* products through metrics owned and commercialised by a transnational publishing industry, all for the sake of competitiveness or 'excellence'. 'Progress', in this sense, becomes normalised everywhere despite the large body of research calling into question the social benefits of such a globalising imperative for scholarly work, not to mention the incompatibility of non-instrumental values traditionally attached to scholarship, especially in the humanities and the social sciences, with the accumulative drive of contemporary 'knowledge production'.

Drawing partly on recent research that problematises the effects of globalised neoliberalism in academic institutions, in this paper we touch critically upon a deeper question about how progress operates at the level of academic subjectivities and cultures. While the pursuit of global competitiveness through industrialised publishing seems inseparable from the neoliberal rationality currently hegemonic in higher education institutions, it is the longstanding cultural hegemony of 'progress' (arguably, the expansive power of Western civilisation) that seems to sustain, at the subjective level, the structural problems (such as economic inequality or rather violence, including epistemic and environmental violence) that critical

scholarship is expected to address in a transformative way (Savransky, 2021). Our question in this regard is double: How are 'we', as flesh and bone scholars writing and publishing from a highly specific context, implicated in, or complicit with, the globalising imperative of 'progress' (or academic capitalism) that we perceive as colonising our institutional environments? What can we do about what we do, so as to transform it in a critical way?

We address these questions in an experimental fashion which began with a spontaneous, informal dialogue between the two principal authors of this paper. This dialogue touched upon our own scholarly practices of researching and publishing individually and with others as well as the institutional context of the Mexican university at which both of us work. While such a friendly starting point might have led nowhere besides just talking about ourselves, what we share in this paper is an effort to jointly articulate our experience as a contribution to the larger scholarly discussion and problematisation of neoliberal academic cultures. What we propose to reflect on is the question of how to re-route our own scholarly investments in 'progress' towards a solidarity-based, critical and creative commitment to an 'after progress'. A glance at our personal and professional trajectories and their intersection in recent years should help our readers to understand where each of us writes from, and how this paper came to be configured:

Roger Magazine was born in the U.S., raised in Canada and trained as a sociocultural anthropologist in the U.S. before spending the last quarter of a century living and working in Mexico. He was drawn to anthropology by its method of not simply studying others, but rather learning from them and placing their understandings on a par and in dialogue with social theory, thereby shining a different light on the latter and its claims to universal truth and authority. Working in a Mexican academic institution and becoming increasingly disconnected and liberated from the dominant anglophone academic discourse, he began to experience the challenge of science's universal claims to authority on a more personal level, seeing his own work labelled as 'uninteresting' and insufficiently 'up to date' by some reviews in anglophone publications. After taking on the role of Director of the Universidad Iberoamericana's tri-disciplinary Department of Social and Political Sciences in 2020, with its somewhat contradictory roles of evaluating individual academic performances and fomenting collective collaboration, he increasingly began to focus his anthropological gaze on the processual and social aspects of academic work. His previous research on the specificities of social action and motivation in a Mexican town, Tepetlaoxtoc (more on this in the following sections), influenced his thinking on

the topic, especially after a friend and academic collaborator, Pedro Pitarch, suggested that his description of action in Tepetlaoxtoc might be more widely applicable. In other words, Roger became interested in how theories of social action from Tepetlaoxtoc might help us not just to better understand life there and in other Mexican villages and towns, but also in a cosmopolitan academic setting. Hence his and others' ongoing effort to combine anthropology's interest in alterity with the contemporary social reality of connectivity.

Gabriela Méndez Cota was born in Mexico and trained as a media and cultural theorist in the U.K. before returning to live and work in Mexico City. Her work interprets Mexican cultural politics as played out in public controversies around 'new' or digital technologies and biotechnologies through the lens of contemporary thought practices such as deconstruction, feminist theory and psychoanalysis. Gabriela became the principal editor of *Culture Machine* in 2014 and, after three years of operating as an independent lecturer and academic advisor in a variety of educational institutions, including the National Centre for the Arts and 17, Institute of Critical Studies, she joined the Philosophy Department at the Universidad Iberoamericana in 2017. During the COVID-19 pandemic, while acting as the convenor of two postgraduate programmes alongside her substantive teaching and research responsibilities, she formed a group with fellow convenors from other academic departments of the university, with the purpose of reflecting on the implications of increased administrative loads for academic trajectories, including through research performance assessment. Marisol López Menéndez, a member of the faculty of the Social and Political Sciences department, introduced Roger and the four programme convenors in this Department to Gabriela's group. There Gabriela and Roger recognised their common concerns with the institutional conditions for academic research, the geopolitics of scholarly recognition and circulation, toxic individualism and competitiveness that mark tendencies in university cultures of evaluation, and above all with alternative, or socially oriented, forms of scholarship. They began, after the lockdown, a series of conversations, usually over coffee or lunch at the university, on their different (disciplinary, theoretical) approaches to such issues, which eventually led to the writing of this article.

Even if the following sections of this paper strive towards a coherent argument, we regard them as re-arrangeable fragments of a living experiment, a test of our own convictions regarding the social and creative nature of scholarship, and especially of our conviction that innovative scholarship depends not on competitive or progressive industriousness but rather on a constant, if often invisible, practice of

solidarity. First, we situate solidarity as a problem in contemporary academic cultures and focus on the ethical and political question of subjective investments in progress as *individualistic* disinvestments in the capacity to act *collectively*. Secondly, we suggest, as an example of scholarly solidarity 'after progress', our bringing together, in this paper, Gary Hall's critique of liberal humanism in critical theory (a decisive influence in Gabriela's philosophical understanding of humanities-based scholarship) and Roy Wagner's 'reverse anthropology' (a notion that illuminates Roger's empirical work in Tepetlaoxtoc, Mexico). We construe the solidarity between those two approaches as 'reverse scholarship', yet in the following sections we try to make clear, through our diverse interpretations of such a construct, that we do not attempt to position reverse scholarship as One (theoretical paradigm or methodological recipe), and instead position it as a call to collaborate in the imagination of alternative assessment criteria for scholarly work. Last but not least, we wish to highlight the critical contributions made to this paper by formal and informal peer reviewers, as an enactment of the non-capitalistic kind of re-valuing of scholarship that we want to promote as an 'after progress'.

On being nice to each other

> *I do not know how it happens that nature fails to place within the hearts of men a burning desire for liberty, a blessing so great and so desirable that when it is lost all evils follow thereafter, and even the blessings that remain lose taste and savour because of their corruption by servitude* (Étienne de la Boétie, 1577).[i]

In a recent book on the problematic effects of quantitative evaluations on careers and research topics in the UK social sciences, sociologist Juan Pablo Pardo-Guerra (2022) advocates 'solidarity' among academics as an alternative to the dominant quantifying culture of research performance assessment. This advice follows from his conclusion that academics in UK universities themselves are to blame in large part for such a culture, even if university administrators are the ones who apply it. Pardo-Guerra reminds readers that while metrics-focused assessments have intensified in recent decades, leading to what he dubs 'the quantified scholar', there is a longer history of competition for academic recognition and prestige on which the current performance assessment practices draw. In other words, our own investments in the practices and notions of intellectual private property and the merits of its supposed owners are the foundation of the quantified scholar.

Indeed, Gary Hall, one of the founding editors of *Culture Machine*, has been for a long time posing the problem of exactly how *we*, as scholars working within unequal academic institutions, are not only produced, or subjected, by those institutions, but also of exactly how we remain, in spite of everything, responsible for them. The fact is that even the most politically radical among humanities scholars, observes Hall, remains identified with normative, authoritative concepts such as the individualistic human author, the fixed and finished codex print book, linear thought, the long form argument, self-expression, originality, creativity and copyright (2021: 2). Such are the concepts that articulate the 'liberal humanist' face of progress, and very much pre-date the neoliberal conjuncture of globalisation. As Gary Hall himself observed in a critical, solidarity-based feedback to this paper,

> …the above are also features of the classical capitalist pre-neoliberal liberal university. And liberalism is of course where the original notion of universalism comes from. Liberals regard liberalism as the only system of government that is true and valid for everyone, independent of historico-cultural context (i.e., that which would be universally accepted by all reasonable persons if they had the freedom to choose). And precisely because the liberal rights to life, liberty and property are held to be universal, liberal individuals (usually Euro-Western, white, middle-class men) have regarded themselves as having the responsibility – the "civilising mission" – to impose their liberalism onto others. This would be one form of "progress". Hence colonialism etc.

The individualistic human author, the fixed and finished codex print book, linear thought, the long form argument, self-expression, originality, creativity and copyright, might very well be the (liberal humanist) criteria of scholarly hierarchy or prestige that Pardo-Guerra observes as the foundation of the contemporary 'quantified scholar'. However, his call for 'solidarity' in the face of quantification could be interpreted as itself a liberal proposal to just be nice to each other while continuing to play by the same rules of 'progress', since he elaborates neither on what form solidarity might take given the weight of their longer history, nor on what solidarity among scholars might achieve *in practice* within concrete institutional settings. In our own view, being nice to each other is *not* a bad idea (and we must thank Jennifer Wolgemuth, one of our peer reviewers, for suggesting we clarify this), but we do want to go beyond an understanding of solidarity as mere sympathy or benevolence among peers who continue to play by the rules of 'progress'. We seek to draw out a more practical understanding of solidarity as 'after progress'.

For us, the challenge of 'after progress' resides in understanding 'progress' as not only a top-down policy imposition from a neoliberal administration, but more deeply as a civilisational phenomenon of 'voluntary servitude', as per the anti-authoritarian thinker Etienne de la Boétie. Even though de la Boétie lived even before the global dissemination and digital mediation of liberalism, Marxism, and neoliberalism, his notion of voluntary servitude continues to be useful to describe and explain the cooperation of individuals and groups with the very same institutional arrangements that deprive them of their capacity to act in solidarity with themselves and each other. In this case, we use it to pose the question of why it is that we scholars ourselves sustain, in practice, the tyranny of competitive individualism, or 'progress', that undermines and erodes our collective agency.

In *After Progress*, Martin Savransky could be read as echoing de la Boétie when he asks what it would take to break free from 'the modes of political, scientific, and aesthetic organisation *by which we have stood* have rendered us *bystanders* to our own drowning' (2021: 270). Savransky draws from Reinhart Koselleck's conceptual history to think about 'progress' as a problem of existence and perception, rather than as a question of theory and belief. In his words, 'the problem is not so much that we don't or didn't know, but that we can't stop' (2021: 269). If the 'we' is taken to refer to those of us who identify as academics, the problem would be that academics seem unable to stop replicating, through our conventional ways of writing and publishing, 'the very modern mode of evaluation from which the values of global development, infinite growth, scientific advance, technological innovation, salvage accumulation, and ethical betterment are derived' (Savransky, 2021: 270). Even our well-meaning descriptions and theorisations of emancipatory politics – in being expressed and disseminated through concepts of the individualistic human author, the fixed and finished codex print book, linear thought, the long form argument, self-expression, originality, creativity and copyright – would end up serving the 'world-ploughing machine that has rendered the ground for collective living and flourishing too loose and granular to provide any further sustenance' (2021: 270).[ii]

Once we bring together Savransky's critique of 'progress' and Gary Hall's earlier critique of liberal humanism and its neoliberal development in academic settings, Pardo-Guerra's injunction to solidarity appears as a partial recognition of the need for a deep transformation of academic culture. How then could a contemporary call for 'solidarity' *effectively* suspend our voluntary servitude to progress and re-orient scholarship *after progress*? Beyond being good

liberals, or just nice to each other for the sake of more 'excellent' research products, more institutional competitiveness or 'progress', we can think of solidarity as a radical praxis of dis-identification from the modern, Western subject of progress, which is, of course, the subject of constant scrutiny and assessment in educational and research bureaucracies. Or, in Hall's way of putting it: 'unless we can unthink and unlearn liberal humanism, we risk perpetuating the kind of unjust and unequal culture with which many of us are all too familiar' (Hall, 2021: 5).

Whether based in the Global North or in the Global South, many of us academic workers are indeed familiar with the class, gender, and racial hierarchies that the institutions of modern science – from the university and the traditional disciplines to the mainstream scholarly publishing system, as several contributions to this issue attest – have historically reproduced even as they created spaces for calling them into question. The challenge remains of either effectively transforming such institutions on a meaningful scale or becoming cynical at a time when capitalism, or the imperative of 'progress', has revealed itself as devastating through deepening inequality, rising authoritarianism and climate chaos. If the problem seems intractable, given its planetary scale and the current political trends, we insist that it is because it is at root existential, rather than merely economic, technical, or even philosophical. The problem is 'existential' in the sense that it has to do with the finitude of our scholarly lives, the fact that they are thrown into a situation of voluntary servitude, where nevertheless there persists a certain call for 'authenticity' or 'freedom' for scholarly life. Therefore, in what follows, we do not offer a global or a technical solution to the universalisation of metrics-focused performance assessment in academia. Instead, we chronicle our reflections around what it would take for 'solidarity' to become a practical alternative to the uncritical uptake of 'quantifying' assessment methods and criteria, as we observe this happening in our most immediate institutional context in Mexico.

Fifteen years ago, Mexican anthropologist Stefan Igor Ayora Díaz described how neoliberal restructuring of higher education institutions in Mexico[iii] was overriding scholarly forms of life (2009: 89). What he termed 'the accountologist' referred to an academic worker or 'self' whose accountability was no longer owed to the public but rather, in the first place, to the university's administration through clerical bookkeeping of one's acts. As far as we can see, 'the accountologist' continues to describe academic cultures as we have experienced them in Mexico's higher education and research system. Moreover, it still seems relevant to understand the problem, as Ayora Díaz does through a reference to Homi Bhabha, as that of an

appropriated cultural logic, which is that of the corporation as it has been disseminated by the university in postcolonial contexts. We also agree with Ayora Díaz that there is still an opportunity to challenge this restructuring and to ease up on the race for individual academic prestige and economic survival:

> Certainly there is prestige and recognition to be gained by the university, by its administrators, and by its faculty. This prestige is translatable into power in the national arena, a power used to negotiate for increased funding and, if need be, political leverage. At the same time, the university enforces standards presumed to be universal, and institutes mechanisms for the surveillance and discipline of academic workers that are being translated into a system of rewards and punishment. So far, in learning to manage this new form of life and to inhabit the space of contemporary universities, professors have not been able to avoid becoming fragmented as a body and compelled to focus on reports and evaluations. There is still potential in this context for interstitial creativity and the generation of alternative projects. But such projects would require that professors cease depending on salary incentives to survive, and that they resist granting legitimacy to the agents of institutional change. Until this happens, transnational agencies will continue to impose their systems of accounting, and academic workers will continue to blame their local administrators (2009: 101).

Such would be the specific constraints and 'voluntary servitude' of most Mexican academics, vis à vis Pardo-Guerra's advised 'solidarity' in the UK. While, up until now, the economic dependence on salary bonuses seems to have affected researchers in public Mexican institutions more than at private universities, such as our employer, private university administrations' increasing concern with competitiveness through global university rankings has meant their ever more enthusiastic embrace of globalised standards of performance research assessment, which has spread to researchers. Ironically, the most recent wave of neoliberal restructuring within our own institution takes place in a new uncertain conjuncture in which the Mexican government has undertaken an alleged de-neoliberalisation of the state-funded research system that openly discriminates against individuals employed by private institutions, even if these are non-profit and pursue a public mission such as education.

In the years since Ayora Díaz's conceptualisation of the accountologist, an infrastructural perspective has gained ground in

studies of scholarly communication. Academic publishing is seen today as a 'sociotechnical assemblage' that includes monographs, journals, Journal Impact Factors, H-Index, citation metrics, Article Processing Charges, and Global University Rankings, among others like the Digital Object Identifier (DOI), all of which drive institutional competition and compliance with metrics. These metrics are largely controlled by extractive multinational corporations that have formed 'data cartels' through mergers and acquisitions, thereby aligning the missions of higher education with capitalist market logics (Okune & Chan, 2023: 279). The ongoing identification of 'scientific excellence' with publishing in mainstream Anglophone journals has led not only to 'new geographies of academic credibility' that, in fact, once again place Europe and North America at the apex of the research economy and its reputational stratification (Boncourt & Millis, 2023: 319), but also to the relegation of the humanities and social sciences to a subaltern position within a new type of symbolic capital focused on global recognition by metrics (Beigel, 2023: 75).

Despite the historical role of Latin American scholarly publishing in pioneering the open access movement through 'diamond journals', regional portals like REDALYC, LATINDEX, and SCIELO (which were originally supported by public agencies and universities) remain undervalued in the research assessment systems of countries such as Chile, Colombia, and Mexico, which puts academic workers under the pressure to publish more, or even only, in high-ranked journals as listed in Scopus or WoS (Web of Science). Critical sociologists of knowledge, such as Fernanda Beigel, problematise the social consequences of prioritising visibility through these indexes, and insist that different types of publications are still valued differently, with criteria that may vary from one country to another, from one institution to another or from one discipline to another. While publishing in regional or non-indexed journals may not bring academic rewards to international academic elites, they are still 'fed' and 'consumed' by nationally or regionally oriented scholars and students (Beigel, 2023: 83). Such biases in emergent assessment criteria in Latin American Universities highlight the need for a profound transformation of research assessment (83). As we have posited, such a transformation cannot be described as mere 'solidarity' in the sense of a liberal solution of colleagues being nicer to each other during performance evaluations. Instead, it may require – whether we like it or not – some scaling-up of political and labour organisation within and across academic institutions. For the purposes of this paper – the supporting experience of which has been rather small scale – we hold that such a political push of 'solidarity' must begin on the ground with a gradual, collaborative, and sustained

dis-identification from 'the accountologist' within ourselves and a proposal of alternative forms of understanding value in our work.

Where to start?

Academic creativity is what happens while you're busy updating your CV
(what John Lennon might have said had he been an academic).

From the beginning, Gabriela and Roger converged in a curiosity about the specifically cultural and subjective dimensions of research performance assessment. Despite the discomfort these dimensions cause for many of us, they seem to be taken for granted even as they underlie the juridical and techno-economic dimensions of research production that are often privileged, if not absolutized, whenever matters of scholarly publishing are brought to a conversation in their immediate institutional surroundings. Gabriela noticed a relative dispersion, in Latin America, of humanities-based and critico-theoretical thematisation of the phenomenon Ayora Díaz's referred to as 'the accountologist', despite more recent notable contributions by Mexican social psychologist Claudia Mónica Salazar Villalva (2013; 2022) and Chilean literary theorist raúl rodríguez freire (2018; 2020). These authors pay attention to the fact that, being something we inhabit intimately and daily, the neoliberal model of 'the accountologist' is something that we reproduce even when, through our 'critical' work, we try to contest it, so much that if the model were to collapse, 'we' would collapse with it too.[iv] This work resonates with a more localised profusion of Anglophone research on academic subjectivities, selves, and sufferings in the neoliberal age, as expertly reviewed by Millicent Churcher and Debra Talbot (2020). The latter detail the challenge that bureaucratisation – a larger social framework for 'the accountologist' – poses to academic subjectivities, which are traditionally rooted in liberal, yet non-bureaucratic values of autonomy, creativity, community, public service, and trust, rather than in the neoliberal values of individuality, competitiveness and accumulation.

As Churcher and Talbot also note, research into academic lives shows that top-down systems of auditing, evaluation, assessment, and accreditation in education turn out to be counterproductive. Instead of improving the quality or boosting the efficiency of work, and instead of reducing an organisation's costs, they increase both work and costs through bureaucratisation. Further, they impair academic workers' engagement and productivity, by detracting them from non-calculative, non-competitive collaboration and experimentation (2020: 31). Among the existential consequences of these processes,

they highlight a coercive kind of emotional self-management that compounds an already diminished sense of agency among educators, resulting in 'feelings of disengagement and boredom rather than in patterns of collective mobilisation and resistance' (Churcher & Talbot, 2020: 29). Finally, they pose the political question above as one of how to transform professional boredom into something different than personal insecurities, feelings of guilt or shame.

An early focus of Gabriela and Roger's conversation was peer review. They shared and reflected upon experiences of their work having been reviewed both in 'the Global North' (mainly North America and the UK) and in 'the Global South' (mainly in Mexico). While Roger is a senior anthropologist who publishes both in American journals of anthropology and on the Mexican disciplinary circuit, Gabriela has a hybrid professional identity as a UK-educated, media theory and cultural studies practitioner with just seven years of working in a Philosophy Department. She combines publishing in English for a transnational community of Anglophone critical theorists with publishing locally, in Spanish, for a regionally dispersed community of readers interested in cultural politics and critical theory. Experiences of peer review in these two very different trajectories found common ground in a perception of deep-rooted, tacit hierarchies and a suspicion that peer review is one of the practices that reproduces those hierarchies. Guided by a shared interest in reflecting upon their experiences of academic peer review, Roger and Gabriela first undertook a short-lived experiment of rhetorical analysis of peer review forms that did not come to fruition as a formal research project,[v] yet set the foundation for a continued dialogue on broader issues such as the configuration of academic subjectivities or identifications.

Through their early dialogue on peer review, Gabriela and Roger also came to recognise the existence of false assumptions about the nature of their work that veil the social practices that are the condition of possibility of what they do. They agreed that such false assumptions derive from the fact that their productivity is on the whole individualised. When it comes to our research, we are each formally responsible for coming up with disciplinary topics and results that are original and marketable for the discipline, as if we were individual entrepreneurs exploiting a niche market. There are moments along the way when we interact with others and receive feedback (or more often criticism), but the effort is mostly perceived and credited as individual and as in competition with others for funding, publication space and disciplinary prestige (Pinheiro, 2023).

This individualisation of our work, along with some of our peers' obsession with originality or novelty, are quite real. So too, are their effects, since they hide the everyday social interactions – such as non-disciplinary conversations – and the dependencies – such as friendship – that are often the actual basis of what we accomplish. It explains why we scholars reproduce, through the material medium of our writing and publishing practices, the dominant neoliberal capitalist culture of quantification and individualised performance assessment that our increasingly corporatised institutions regard as 'progress' and that severely threatens the collective agency, wellbeing and future of scholarship as such. And it also explains why *we*, Gabriela and Roger, took over a year of informal, always hurried, conversations before starting a co-authored piece of writing. Confronted by a fresh wave of institutional restructuring, which seeks to privilege, for the sake of university rankings, competitive visibility or 'impact' metrics in individual research performance assessment – and thus, potentially, in the assessment of scholarly life as a whole – we asked ourselves what our conversation could contribute, in such a conjuncture, to promoting not just critical reflection among our peers about our individualistic investments in academic 'progress', but also to solidarity-driven, innovative forms of collaboration that would be more nurturing of scholarship itself, the latter conceived as a non-instrumental and *collective* form of life.

Drawing from her participation in critical open access publishing projects such as *Living Books About Life* (2011) and *Community-led Open Publication Infrastructures for Scholarly Monographs* (COPIM, 2019-2023), as well as her experience as a principal editor of *Culture Machine*, Gabriela introduced Roger to the history and perspective of the Radical Open Access Collective, which pursues a *practical* transformation of normative concepts in humanities scholarship through non-profit, solidarity-based and *creative* scholarly publishing initiatives including Open Humanities Press, to which *Culture Machine* belongs. Gabriela emphasised the uniqueness of the 'praxis' (Adema, 2013) that Radical Open Access has imprinted on her own trajectory, and reflected on the fact that such an outlook seems hardly legible or legitimate as genuine academic work within traditional, disciplinary fields such as Philosophy, certainly in the Mexican context. Yet the point of Radical Open Access was, for her, precisely not to simply 'import' a topic or a method of humanities research just because it is already validated within the highly specific conditions of Global North institutions – which would be reason enough for many Mexican university administrators to label this importation as 'progress' [vi] – but rather – and *against* progress – to create the conditions for the emergence of bottom-up critical discourses from within the specific conditions in which she operates. An opportunity

for this emerges vis-à-vis the increasing, top-down corporatisation of university cultures, which includes metrics-driven research performance in the service of university rankings. Could the conversation between Gabriela and Roger help them both and their respective scholarly communities, to not just be nice to each other, but moreover to think further about how to contest, collectively, the 'there is no alternative' narrative of neoliberal metrics-driven progress?

We think of our dialogue, which went on for over a year without any guarantee of becoming a 'research output' or 'end product', as a kind of situated answer to that question. Specifically in connection with scholarly publishing, we want to emphasise the nuance expressed by scholars such as Fernanda Beigel (2023) when they acknowledge contextual diversity and widespread collaboration among scholars despite and against the well-documented structural trends as well as the need for collectively and carefully formulated alternatives. In addition, and as stated clearly by Zenia Yébenes, one of our peer reviewers, the discomfort many of us feel with academic 'accountability' makes the time ripe for a collective and careful formulation and implementation of alternatives. We thus ask ourselves and others, what alternatives to rankings/impact factors might be brought to life through experimental, collaborative research and writing? In the face of pressures to evaluate end products quantitatively, how can we also recognise the importance and value of the non-quantifiable aspects of our work, such as meaning, purpose and inspiration that are more identifiable in processes than in end products?

The rest of this article is divided into four more sections. The next one gives an account, necessarily partial, of the problem that 'progress' poses to academic work in the Mexican context. It integrates some of the many essays, articles, chapters, and books that Roger and Gabriela exchanged and discussed throughout their one-year conversation. In the following section, Roger describes his anthropological work in Tepetlaoxtoc, Mexico, and how the social dynamics he learned from the people there contribute to his understanding of the notion of reverse scholarship. The penultimate section features Gabriela's reflections on the existential aspects of such an anthropological notion in the wake of an experiment with 'rewriting' and publishing an open access philosophy book in collaboration with UK colleagues, among them the guest-editor of this issue, Rebekka Kiesewetter. The last, concluding section, interweaves the two very different approaches and writing styles and makes them resonate within the broader search by the critical scholarly community (CLACSO & FOLEC, 2022), for an alternative approach to academic evaluation

which is based on a commitment to creativity and solidarity before and above the quantifiable output at the service of competitive university rankings.

'Reverse anthropology' for a Scholarship *Entre Todos* (by everyone)

> *In other words, our "reverse anthropology" will have nothing to do with "culture," with production for its own sake, though it might have a great deal to do with the quality of life. And if human beings are as generally inventive as we have assumed, it would be very surprising if such a "reverse anthropology" did not already exist* (Wagner, 1981 [1975]: 31).

Roger has been heavily influenced by the teachings and work of anthropologist Roy Wagner. He has been particularly inspired by how Wagner's notions of innovation, invention and creativity, as derived from Melanesian [vii] epistemologies, offer an alternative to novelty and progress:

> Words like "invention" and "innovation" are often used to distinguish novel acts or ideas, or things created for the first time, from actions, thoughts, and arrangements that have become established, or habitual. Such a distinction conceals an assumption of the "automatic" or "determined" nature of ordinary action quite as much as deterministic notions do. By extending the usage of "invention" and "innovation" to the whole range of thought and action, I mean to counteract this assumption and to assert the spontaneous and creative realization of human culture (Wagner, 1981 [1975]: 36-37).

This conceptualisation of human activity values effectiveness rather than novelty and appreciates the creativity in everyday human action in contrast to the common practice of associating creativity with historical betterment or progress. It is also important to add that when Wagner refers to 'human culture' he is referring to social rather than individual action and creativity. Melanesians make explicit that each human action or utterance is an innovative extension of what, collectively, has been done before. Everyday human action, as innovation, is thus like a constant metaphorical extension of previous extensions. Wagner (1981 [1975]) argues that anthropologists and their readers find so-called primitive peoples to be so alive and interesting in contrast to the manner in which modern culture denies us our everyday creativity, representing our everyday work and

achievements as routine and leaving creativity to a few 'great minds' who will alter history.

Wagner's notion of innovation resonates with other important efforts to rethink academic or scientific work. This includes, for example, philosopher of science Paul Feyerabend's (1975) argument 'against method' and his proposal that, in reality, what works in science is methodological anarchy or the notion that 'anything goes'. In Feyerabend's anarchy there is no lineal progress and disparate ideas can be brought together from any source, time or place in the name of creativity. In fact, he seems to be suggesting that if we gave up our disciplinary (in both senses of the word) exercises conducted through our methodological vigilance, we could get rid of 'normal science' completely and thus the need for periodic paradigm shifts required to break out of linear advancement. There are also examples of a total reconceptualisation of education and academia that echo the Melanesian theory of creativity, such as in the writings of John Dewey (1916), who pointed to the contradictions of reproducing a hierarchical educational system in a democratic society. He argued that instead of an older generation educating and disciplining a younger one, education should be practised as a coming together of different generations who then have the opportunity to create new knowledge through their interaction and differences.

In a recent book *Anthropology and/as Education*, anthropologist Tim Ingold (2018) breathes new life into Dewey's proposal by comparing education with anthropological fieldwork. Ingold argues that what should, and fortunately, often does, occur in the classroom is not the transmission of knowledge but rather the coming together or 'communing' of heterogeneous actors, who do not necessarily have to agree, but rather connect and communicate. He describes anthropological fieldwork in a similar manner. This offers a significant contrast to the dominant notion of scientific research as following a pre-established methodology in order to collect data. In his realistic description, fieldwork appears as a much messier process, often out of the researchers' control, in which they are thrown into a dialogue with the people in the field that transforms all involved. Ingold refers to this version of education as an 'undercurrent' in contemporary universities, in the sense that it is often practised, but rarely recognised and valued by administrators and authorities. Ingold proposes that this relationship between an undercurrent of education as communing and a dominant version of education as transmission should be reversed.

Tepetlaoxtoc, where Roger conducted ethnographic research from 2001 to 2011, is a town of about 8,000 residents just a few kilometres

from Nezahualcóyotl's Texcoco that Gabriela refers to below and just an hour and half drive from Mexico City's centre. One of the topics that drew his attention was the manner in which its residents conceptualised and criticised the ways of the people from Mexico City with whom they came into frequent contact (Magazine, 2012). In this 'reverse anthropology', Tepetlaoxtoc's residents described these city people as oddly individualistic, to the point that they suffered from an erroneous and somewhat ridiculous understanding of how things get done. To understand this critique, we must first take a glimpse at the contrasting, local theory of human action. Roger has referred to this theory as one of 'interactive production' (2012).

In this theory, residents make explicit the fact that all action is motivated by the previous actions of others. Actions are conceived as parts of chains of actions, in which people conceive of their own deeds as a product of others' motivation and as a future motivation for still others. This of course means that the products of actions do not have individual owners: final products are the result of collaboration. Persons must take up specific and distinctive roles in such productive processes – including those whose job it is to 'get the ball rolling' – but these distinctions are not fixed as social hierarchies. In other words, while people's actions are recognised, there is no ownership or prestige to be claimed by individuals. It is important to note that in this context, not only actions, but emotional states are caused by others as well. In this sense, getting things done requires that actors infect others with their enthusiasm.

The yearly *fiestas* put on for patron saints in Tepetlaoxtoc provide an illustrative example of interactive production. A key figure in putting on the fiesta is the *mayordomo* (foreman or administrator). In theory, a different person takes on the role of mayordomo each year (see below), and they are the closest we could get to identifying an 'author' for the fiesta, but a closer look at the process tells us something different. The mayordomo's role is to involve others, to motivate them to participate in the fiesta, so that in the end the fiesta is put on *entre todos* ('by everyone'). The mayordomo begins by creating and motivating a small team of *compañeros* ('companions' or 'colleagues') who will assist them in the broader task of going door to door throughout the village to try to convince people to participate in the fiesta in the form of a cash donation.

As one resident explained to Roger: 'the village is like a wheel' in which the mayordomo's compañeros are the spokes and the rest of the villagers the wheel itself and the mayordomo's job is to get the wheel rolling. Thus, the mayordomo does not create or recreate the social – a common misunderstanding in anthropological literature on

the topic – which is already there in the form of the wheel, nor do they create the fiesta. What they do create or more accurately invoke is other people's actions – a product that is not the mayordomo's at all. This understanding of the mayordomo's role explains why people are quite critical when a mayordomo claims the fiesta, or the public work that has been built with the leftover money, as theirs or as that of the team. In fact, this attitude is likened to that of city residents with their denial of the social nature of all action. For Tepetlaoxtoc's residents, every fiesta will and should turn out differently and the real challenge is not achieving novelty for novelty's sake, but rather getting and keeping the wheel rolling, recalling Wagner's proposal to understand innovation in terms not of novelty, but of effective everyday human social action.

There is in fact no clear beginning to this process of putting on the fiesta. The mayordomo themself has not volunteered for the post and is instead persuaded or motivated by the previous mayordomo. And the invitations to compañeros to join them are not out of the blue, but rather the continuation of interactions of the same type that have occurred over the years, even going back to previous generations. In other words, all current actions derive from a previous chain of interactions. This does not mean that the chain's continuation is guaranteed or taken for granted. The motion is not perpetual (like we often imagine 'tradition' to be), and so it must constantly be recreated through human effort. The chain can be broken, and this occasionally happens, as when a mayordomo cannot find, or more accurately, generate, a replacement and is expected to put on the fiesta another year. However, this inability to generate a replacement is already a sign that the chain of movement is breaking down and the mayordomo is unlikely to be able to motivate sufficient participation to put on an acceptable fiesta. This generally happens because they have taken an individualised approach to putting on the fiesta, fooling themself into thinking that they can do it without others' participation. A particular fiesta can even go uncelebrated for a couple of years until someone else, whose personal chains of action are more intact, starts the wheel rolling again.

A 'reverse anthropology' by people from Tepetlaoxtoc trying to understand academia would surely struggle to understand the logic of a number of our common practices. Awards for individual achievement would appear to be completely counterproductive, encouraging the false notion that researchers do not need others, and thus putting at risk the chain of collaborations that are vital to keeping production going. In fact, at a recent award ceremony at the university where we work, Roger observed, as academics and graduate students who were asked to speak on behalf of the award winners seemed

unable to place enough emphasis on the collective nature of their productivity and their debts to collaborators who had not received awards. The awards, though surely enjoyed in certain senses, seemed to create a kind of embarrassment and discomfort that had to be countered by recalling the truly collective nature of the achievements. As Jennifer Wolgemuth suggests, this embarrassment is not simply a show of modesty, but rather the result of a genuine discomfort with the individualisation of our work. And yet, we seem to persist in the perception that academic production would grind to a halt if the incentive of individual rewards were taken away. Surely, some individuals would be discouraged from working, perhaps especially those motivated principally by feelings of inadequacy (something most of us suffer to a certain extent – in part thanks to the pressures created by the very illusion of individual achievement). Nevertheless, it is important to remember that interactive production in Tepetlaoxtoc does not neglect the problem of motivation, but rather expands it by locating it outside of the individual, in other persons. In Tepetlaoxtoc there is 'innovation' without need for novelty and there is quality without the need for evaluation by experts. Quality is ensured by involving others – if an activity attracts and motivates them to participate, without applying coercion, it clearly has collective approval and value.

Building on Ingold's (2018) notion of an undercurrent, Roger would argue that versions of motivation and production, similar to those found in Tepetlaoxtoc, already exist in academia even if they are rarely recognised in an explicit way. Thus, Roger's proposal is not that academic work in itself would have to be radically altered in response to the critique presented by Tepetlaoxtoc's 'reverse anthropology'. Rather, in his view we need only change our formal understanding and valuation of it. He suggests that what academics do is already a chain of actions resulting in collective products, that then, in turn, produce more actions and chains (often interconnecting). To paraphrase Zenia Yébenes, one of our peer reviewers, it is a question of expanding our notion of the academic commons to include much of what we usually unquestioningly classify as private academic property. The current problem is the manner in which these common chains are fragmented through the fetishisation of products as static things, with deceptively clear ownership, valued for their novelty. An anthropology of academia conducted from Tepetlaoxtoc would find multiple interactions among colleagues, students, administrators and their work, and would be baffled by the way we present production in our curriculum vitae.

It is important to note that productive work in Tepetlaoxtoc is not simply collectivised or alienated from individuals by the community.

Rather, there is constant emphasis on people needing other people—the people, including their specific individualities, are not denied or forgotten about. This explicitly social understanding of human action and productivity could serve as a model for re-conceptualizing academic work. In Tepetlaoxtoc it is assumed that getting anything done requires working together by which they mean acting to provoke further action in others. In the end what gets done belongs to everyone. 'Creativity' in this sense is about keeping things moving toward the final goal, even if that goal is the same as last year's and the year before that. There is no rulebook for putting on the *fiestas* or any sort of governing body of experts or authorities that oversees what is done. There is just the constant need to do what works to motivate and involve others.

Compare in this sense the process of peer review geared toward the anonymous evaluation of individual products, versus the potential for motivation of ongoing, open conversations and dialogue. At first, Roger felt inhibited about participating in *Culture Machine*'s open peer review dialogue, which was new for him. However, after seeing how much more fluid, enjoyable *and* fruitful it was to exchange ideas with actual persons instead of trying to interpret and please an anonymous reviewer, he began to see in open peer review a logic similar to the explicit recognition of everyone's participation in fiestas in Tepetlaoxtoc and to comprehend more clearly the fetishising and alienating effects (for both authors and reviewers) of the standard peer review process.

Back to Texcoco, After Progress

When she received an invitation from the Centre for Postdigital Cultures (CPC) at Coventry University in the UK to experimentally 'rewrite' an open access book published by Open Humanities Press, Gabriela, for three years, had been dedicating much of her time to fulfilling an administrative service appointment in her academic area. She had had a glimpse, by that time, of the 'boredom' that Churcher and Talbot link to 'a perceived loss of agency and meaning in relation to the changing nature of [academic] work' (2020: 29). 'Bored educators', they note, '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' (39). Even if the invitation to Gabriela came from an academic research centre with a funded research project, at the same time, in another sense, it came from an 'outside' to her sphere of employment. The invitation to 'experiment' provided an opportunity to experience 'boredom' otherwise: less as a debilitating affect/effect of

bureaucratisation and more as *the right time* to take some risks, to move away from the always already calculated, individualised knowledge production that is expected from early career researchers, towards a radically uncertain or 'free' collaboration with others. This was, at least, the meaning that the experiment took on during the COVID-19 pandemic, when everything familiar became strange.

For the CPC, the aim of the experiment was to find out, in the context of a project called *Community-led Open Publication Infrastructures for Monographs* (COPIM),[viii] why readers rarely engage in editing open access materials which are published under a Creative Commons licence that allows them to do so, and to facilitate processes of critical appropriation of open access materials through 'rewriting' in the sense of re-using or re-mixing them to create derivative works. For Gabriela, the immediate aim became that of 'turning the wheel' of collaboration with former students and colleagues who, like her, were keen to do something meaningful with their academic 'training' or work. In hindsight, Gabriela sees the rewriting experiment led by the CPC as one alongside a series of examples, reviewed by Churcher and Talbot, of anarchist and punk pedagogies rejecting 'aggressive individualism, careerism, and disembodied, numbers-driven teaching practices that are encouraged by bureaucratic cultures' (2020: 41). Such pedagogies, as they observe, usually involve some 'hacking' of bureaucratic cultures through practical as well as theoretical experimentation with personal lived experiences or memories. This last bit, which was contributed by Gabriela's team, helps now to frame the experiment also as reverse scholarship, with Gabriela playing the role of a *mayordomo,* namely, that of motivating others to engage and make the *fiesta* possible.

Before gathering a team of rewriters, Gabriela thought about how to reactivate her own earlier experiences of writing, editing and experimenting with Open Humanities Press. She considered, among other possibilities, to rewrite Michael Marder's and Anaïs Tondeur's *The Chernobyl Herbarium*, mainly because it resonated, in content and in form, with an artistic project she had conducted several years ago around the connections between urbanisation, environmental degradation and food cultures in Cholula, Mexico, an ancient town that preserves many traditions of community-building through fiesta and public displays of popular religion, not unlike Tepetlaoxtoc.[ix] Gabriela had returned to Cholula to spend the pandemic lockdown, and from there she invited 9 graduate students and early career researchers, themselves not based in Cholula but in different towns across Mexico, to participate in a digitally-mediated fiesta. The latter unfolded, at first, as an intuitive, free associative search for connections between the narrative of *The Chernobyl Herbarium* and

each of the rewriters' personal memories of environmental accidents and political economic disasters in Mexico. It went through several stages: from a reading group and a collective annotation using the open source tool Hypothesis.io; through discussing the ways in which the *Herbarium* was already associative and itself a 'rewriting' of Svetlana Alexiévich's *Voices of Chernobyl*, an author who (the team concluded) is also herself a rewriter of testimonies; to, finally, selecting a few sub-topics of particular interest to each of the rewriters, who would construct an individually authored essay, to be then fragmented and juxtaposed with others' fragments into a new piece called 'Reuse, rewrite, disappropriate'. In hindsight, at least for Gabriela the value of the fiesta was the process itself, conceived as a challenge to create a new register for thinking in the wake of extreme socioenvironmental catastrophe, that is, for writing at the limits of knowledge, identity and institutions.

Gary Hall makes a distinction between theories that wishfully describe a move away from liberal humanism and theories (such as his 'pirate philosophy' and 'inhumanist theory') that put to the test their own desire to enact such a move through risky experimental practices, practices 'doing things that may indeed appear improper, odd, eccentric and hard to understand at times' (Hall, 2021: 10). While Hall proposes a 'inhumanist' move away from liberal humanism out of 'a desire to generate (and protect) unconditional spaces for experimenting with politics and the political beyond the ways in which they have traditionally been conceived' (2021: 15), Gabriela's team proposed a *non-inhuman* way of rewriting *The Chernobyl Herbarium* out of a desire to write freely with others in a 'situated' or existentially relevant way.[x] That is, the rewriters of *The Chernobyl Herbarium* refused to apply any pre-given method or strategy of artistic disruption or political appropriation to a work that they had chosen, in fact, because it made them reflect on life and death, and on what it means to write about human and environmental devastation that is not perceptible within a merely political, or academic, register. The risk they took was to let themselves – their academic selves – be re-written, or rendered unfinished, by the book's not-absolutely-original fragmentation and montage. Theirs would not be a purely aesthetic or abstract exercise in 'undoing' liberal authorship (by 'being nice' to the text); rather, it would attempt to create another register for thinking with historically marginalised standpoints in the modern narratives of progress, in a country that is well-known for structural and extreme forms of violence.

After asking themselves repeatedly why it would be worthwhile, in this context, to 'rewrite' *The Chernobyl Herbarium* they decided to try and multiply *The Chernobyl Herbarium's* affects/effects on them

through a sense of 'rewriting' partially borrowed from the work of the Mexican writer Cristina Rivera Garza. Herself a reader of Jean Luc Nancy's notion of literary communism, Rivera Garza embraces *rewriting* as a social practice of reading, but also as an 'indocility' that queers, or deviates, or 'disappropriates' subjective identifications with the state. Her critique of the state focuses on 'the literary system' in the Mexican and U.S. contexts, where the problem with appropriative rewriting strategies such as sampling, re-mixing and plagiarising is that they do not necessarily undermine conventional notions of liberal humanist authorship, but most often strengthen their hegemony. Even if at first the system reacts to such experimental practices, over time it accommodates them and returns them to the traditional framework of authorship through figures of the Sampler, the Re-mixer, or the Plagiarist as a gifted Artist. Gabriela's team worked with the question of how this critique could be applied to the academic system as they knew it, and in what way the rewriting of the *Chernobyl Herbarium* could contribute to developing it creatively, in practice.

At first sight, the logic of assimilation Rivera Garza observes in the literary system might seem to play out in *The Chernobyl Herbarium* itself, in so far as the narrative captures witnessing in an individual's voice, that of the Plant Philosopher, in contrast, it seems, with the multiplicity of singular accounts of nuclear trauma that Svetlana Alexiévich interweaves in *Voices of Chernobyl*, which in turn does not foreground, with the same intensity, the co-authorship of non-human beings such as plants. What Jean Luc-Nancy suggested to the rewriting team, via Rivera Garza, however, was that their rewriting the *Herbarium* did not need to be performed as an achievement of either individual, collective or even 'posthuman' authorship and could be experienced, more fundamentally, as a step back from conventional, points-earning academic 'research' (an avatar of 'the state', or indeed, *progress*), and sideways to an open-ended engagement with limited – and yet, infinitely responsible –capacities for environmental witnessing.

'Reuse, rewrite, disappropriate' is the title of a series of testimonial fragments created by Gabriela's team of rewriters for the online publication *Ecological Rewriting: Situated Engagements with The Chernobyl Herbarium*, which is available 'open access' on a PubPub website.[xi] There is nothing 'original' about the fragments, as they merely bear witness to the recent history of environmental devastation in several locations across the Mexican Republic – though in a way that does not hide or cancel out the irreducible singularity of personal lived experience as academic writing often does for the sake of 'excellence' or any other guise of epistemic

universality. In so far as they resonate with and respond to a reading experience rather than theoretically appropriate *The Chernobyl Herbarium's* invitation to vegetal thinking, the testimonial fragments involving 'situated' reuse of *The Chernobyl Herbarium* perform as an example of 'reverse scholarship' based on the dialogue between Roger's learning from the social dynamics of Tepetlaoxtoc as much as on Gabriela's experience of the anarchist, punk, 'pirate' or 'inhumanist' pedagogies of radical open access. In fact, while radical open access practices such as 'rewriting' open access books might be read as enacting novelty-seeking 'theory' in the context of the Anglophone posthumanities, in other contexts (such as Mexico) they can be experienced, more fundamentally, as practices of reverse scholarship. That is, of scholarship committed to valuing and nurturing (rather than evaluating, measuring or ranking) the social process required to create and sustain scholarly institutions, organisations and infrastructures 'after progress'.

In the wake of the COPIM experiment and as a way of connecting it with Roger's work in Tepetlaoxtoc, Gabriela came up with a new fragment that could now be read as 'hacking' the technical and bureaucratising orientation of much current discussion around open access and open science:

> At four, I went to live with my mother in the ancient city of Texcoco, home of the poet-king Nezahualcóyotl (1402-1472). Nezahualcóyotl is said to have witnessed, at the age of 16, the murder of his father at the hands of political enemies. He is said to have escaped and survived multiple assassination attempts with the help of friends and maternal relatives, who gave him the education necessary to become a warrior and, later on, a poet-king. Nezahualcóyotl also became a skilled architect and engineer that advised the neighbouring lake city of Tenochtitlan (present-day Mexico City) in all hydraulic matters. Five centuries later, when I went to live in modern Texcoco with my mother, children like me were taken on school trips to an archaeological site hosting, among other things, a prehispanic "spa" and a botanical garden. There, we were told, Nezahualcóyotl fasted, bathed and wrote poetry. Like most other Mexicans, I soon read some of the poetry attributed to Nezahualcóyotl in state-sponsored textbooks – which were both "free" and "compulsory". Many years would pass before I learned from renowned scholars of the Náhuatl language, such as the late Miguel León Portilla, that such poetry could be regarded as "philosophy", if rescued from ignorance and prejudice, including here the romantic nationalism of the school textbooks. I heard things like this

when I went to university. But I only felt I "learned" something about them when I took a personal interest in the names of "Texcoco" and "Nezahualcóyotl". After reading Roger's book *El pueblo es como una rueda*, I began to imagine that interest as not just a personal one. If some non-inhumans, started to re-write Heidegger's *The Question Concerning Technology*, and replaced the name Hölderlin with that of Nezahualcóyotl, would that be a start to enacting something like scholarship "after progress"?

Or: could fragments like the one above contribute *anything* 'to question the domain that makes a series of communal jobs appear as individual' (Rivera Garza, 2013: 67)? Such is, of course, the academic domain as we know it, in which modern conventions and styles of writing often require an erasure of subjectivity, singularity, and multiplicity, in favour of a clear line of argument expressed through a detached or 'objective' voice whose analytical style is orientated to an establishment of authority (Canagarajah, 2002). If, in certain contexts, such disembodied conventions and disciplined writing styles can perform a critical function – with respect, for instance, to the liberal humanist register of sentimental autobiography (Hall, 2021) – in others a critical cultivation of testimonial writing can work to interrogate historic forms of colonial authority, for example the authority of eurocentric schooling into abstract voices that must compete for 'excellence' in a given field, and which permeates the contemporary, commercially-driven practices of academic publishing.

In contexts, such as Mexico, which are historically constituted by something like *the question concerning coloniality*, the convergence between inhumanist theory and reverse scholarship becomes relevant by suggesting that a genuine 'decolonisation' of scholarly communication requires more than 'inclusion' in the scholarly communication system, that is, more than a broader representation individuals or groups perceived as 'non-Western' (or 'non-excellent') in scholarly communication. It requires, instead, a transnational yet 'situated' creative engagement with academic boredom, which entails, in our view, a divestment, at the level of scholarly subjectivity, from notions of originality, authorship, intellectual property and the marketisation of theory through the publishing industry. Rather than granting economic or political prestige to 'excellent' theory (including decolonial theory) from around the world, for example, decolonisation of scholarship would 'produce theory without a theorist' or rather, a non-individual theorist that would be 'always in the process of being composed out of a multiplicity of different situations and circumstances' (26).[xii]

Of course, it could also be objected that testimonial writing from any particular context is not in itself a solution to epistemic injustices inherent to the globalised field of scholarly publishing, and not even at the philosophical level, where everybody knows that there is no transparent testimony, no possible end to deciphering any given testimonial narrative or self-writing, and that there is instead a tendency to profitable assimilation into a liberal humanist register. At any rate, what the experiment leading to 'Reuse, rewrite, disappropriate' suggests is not of the order of technical solutions or even epistemic representation, but rather is, like this paper as a whole, a call for another conception and practice of the scholarly existence. A collective experimentation with narrative fragmentation can at least help to create a temporary space for experiencing the limits of knowledge, which are also the limits of self-knowledge, of institutionalised competitiveness and progressive self-narrativisation. In this example, reverse scholarship would not be, then, equivalent to 'reverse anthropology'. It would not be about seeing ourselves through the eyes of imagined others, such as ethnic groups or any groups that the Western university imagines as being 'better' or 'outside' or 'beyond' its institutional self. It would not be, in fact, about 'seeing', which is, as we know, a heavily connoted cultural act that is, for the most part, implicated in the perception of progress. Without determining in advance any privileged mode of perception for reverse scholarship, the latter could start by trying to open itself to non-progressive rhythms and temporalities: to not-so-conscious, or not-so-calculative, forms of scholarly writing and publishing.

Conclusion (but not an ending)

> *It is one thing, I argue, to associate creativity with novelty; quite another to see in creation the ceaseless emergence of the absolutely new. One gives us a cornucopia of ends, the other promises perpetual beginning. For the sake of coming generations, this promise needs to be restored* (Ingold 2022: 11).

Despite Gabriela's sabbatical leave and Roger's busy schedule as Department Director, we were able to meet briefly in person to discuss the final version of this conclusion. Roger mentioned that drawing up conclusions is his least favourite part of the writing process: there's too much pressure to perfectly and succinctly capture the complexities of a whole article. In response, Gabriela reminded him that our so-called conclusions were meant to be not an ending but rather an open invitation to continued dialogue, helping him to get unstuck. In this same sense, we mean for this last section to reflect not just what we have said, but the process through which we have

said it. The enjoyable and intellectually challenging chats that initiated this process are a central part of its creation and existence. These chats were both a place for developing ideas and the motivation for the subsequent steps. In these conversations, we drew on connections and articulations between the work each of us has done separately, from within different disciplinary formations and intellectual traditions, while inhabiting the same workplace in Mexico City. There, we came to recognise a shared concern about the dominant criteria of institutional performance assessment and their implications for the collective agency of scholars and the future of universities. It is important to note that these chats are just one example of the interactions with our colleagues, students and more recently open peer reviewers that are essential to understanding this article and its creation. It is important to add that our decision to submit the article for this issue on *After Progress* of the journal *Culture Machine* emerges from our desire to ´practice what we are preaching´ here and to situate our dialogue and reverse scholarship proposal in the not-so-immediate context of critical interventions and debates on scholarly communication that do not shy away from exploring the existential dimensions of a such a problematic.

In this paper we have argued that, if solidarity is to count as a meaningful path *after progress,* it requires not just that we are nicer to each other during performance assessments, including peer review, but also that we embark upon the creative, collaborative task of dis-identification from the modern subject of evaluation. Only such a practical departure from the destructive fantasy of 'progress' can make space for academic freedom understood as non-calculative, inventive solidarity: a new beginning for scholarly work. As a contribution to this new beginning, this article proposes the notion of 'reverse scholarship', not as a new contribution to be evaluated as research output, but rather as a proposal to turn our conventional understanding of academic work on its head. We refer to exchanging the current dominant focus on counting final products for one on processes and their qualities. To accomplish this, it is necessary to embrace notions of creativity and motivation beyond what liberal modernity and capitalism have to offer: everyday rather than heroic creativity and collective rather than individual motivation.

Perhaps what we really need to give up, along with our internal competitions for recognition and prestige, is the illusion that the kind of work we do in academia is distinct from most other kinds of human work. We refer to the fact that our kind of work is often romanticised from within and from without the academy as a special place for creativity, with heroes who, through their superior intellect and hard work, break away from convention to create something novel. This

kind of recognition of our so-called end products and their novelty is what we compete for in evaluations and is what supposedly motivates us to work, an assumption that may be inaccurate as we have suggested here. Further, this romanticised notion of what we do also opens us up to criticism and ever greater accountability when we do not live up to expectations of creating the novel.

What if, instead of this fixation on the particularity of our work and its special relationship to novelty, we were to see our work as no different than any other? Would the university and its participants suffer from ending this illusion or might it benefit them? In relation to evaluation, or, more precisely, valuation, we could practise a 'reverse' performance assessment in which, occasionally, we look back not on what was done, but rather how and with spirit it was done. We could try to remember and highlight the moments that truly gave us satisfaction – such as our chats leading up to the writing of this article and then the open dialogue with the peer reviewers – and thus motivated us to continue. If we are lacking such moments and are thus, probably, unmotivated, we could ask why and try to change something.

As we have argued, achieving such a reverse scholarship is not as difficult as it may at first appear since it already exists as a powerful undercurrent within academic cultures. The first step is to acknowledge its existence, but then we must engage with it on a practical level, by, for example, following the lead of free conversation among strangers, that is, among the individualised workers that many of us scholars have not totally accepted to become. Such conversations are just one of many examples of the importance of creativity as process over creativity aimed at production and of everyday social interaction over fetishised end products. In each case, these comparisons value solidarity over competition and patience and care over the busy, accelerated production for production's sake to which we have become accustomed. Facing looming universal problems like socio-economic inequality and environmental devastation, we could just stop wasting so much time and energy worrying about our production and reporting on it and, instead, just get on with our chains of writing and re-writing, reading and re-reading, discussing and re-discussing, teaching and re-teaching, through which we already motivate each other on a regular basis.

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End Notes

i This quote from de la Boétie's 1577 *Discourse on Voluntary Servitude, Why People Enslave Themselves to Authority* is located in William Garner's edition for Adagio Press, p. 14 of the Kindle version from 2016.

ii This kind of reflection is, of course, not unfamiliar to humanities scholars working within the tradition of contemporary critical theory, which makes a political distinction between talking, writing, or publishing *about* 'collective living' – as idealist philosophers would do – and doing so in a way that brings into existence other forms of 'collective living', such as radical open access: https://radicaloa.postdigitalcultures.org/philosophy/

iii Neoliberal restructuring refers in this case to the precarisation of state-funded higher education institutions during the neoliberal period (1982-2018), which made academic researchers economically dependent on salary bonuses awarded by centralised governmental agencies (specifically the National System of Researchers) on the basis of their productivity as measured and ranked through global competitive standards of 'excellent science'. As our peer reviewer Zenia Yébenes noted, this neoliberal restructuring in many cases displaced earlier forms of solidarity based on mixed labour unions that included both academics and other university workers.

iv The 'we' refers to a subjectivity configured by the language of 'excellence' that becomes accepted as synonymous with 'quality assurance'. For rodríguez freire, 'excellence' is in fact the assurance of consumer sovereignty, customer satisfaction, at the expense of any hindrance that might prevent it 'including teachers who are serious about teaching' (2020: 202). Any politically serious alternative to the neoliberal language of 'excellence' could only spring from a non-negotiable commitment to those areas of life that cannot be subsumed to the logic of capital, such as knowledge itself, which, as freire passionately argues, is of the order of the immeasurable.

v The project began by sending an email to the whole Universidad Iberoamericana community asking scholars to contribute the peer reviews of their own work for our textual analysis, with the promise of anonymity. In reaction to our request, the institution's Legal Services area, which also received the email, expressed concern that this would violate copyright laws. Roger consulted a colleague in the University's law school who suggested otherwise, but this was one of the factors that discouraged us from pursuing this line of inquiry.

vi As one of our open peer reviewers, Zenia Yébenes, points out, many of the contradictions currently suffered by Mexican Universities come precisely from looking to the North rather than the South for examples and models of improvement.

vii Melanesia refers to the Southwestern Pacific island region that extends from New Guinea in the west to Fiji in the east.

viii *Community-led Open Publication Infrastructures for Monographs* (COPIM) was a research project that ran from November 2019 to April 2023, and was funded by the Research England Development (RED) Fund and Arcadia. The project formed an international partnership of researchers, universities, librarians, open access publishers, and infrastructure providers, all united by a desire to enable non-commercial, community-led open access book publishing to flourish. https://archive.copim.ac.uk/

ix Titled *In search of the lost quelite* (2014-2015), that earlier project had already been an iteration of the living book *Another Technoscience is Possible* (2011), itself part of a pioneering instance of radical open access led by UK-based scholars and scholar-led non-profit enterprises such as Open Humanities Press. To this date *In search of the lost quelite* remains accessible as a living book at enbuscadelqueliteperdido.net, featuring traditional recipes, urban photography and testimonial writing. The project's afterlife included new collaborations with former members of the hackerspace *El*

Rancho Electrónico – such as Mauricio Gómez, Rosaura Zapata, Perro Tuerto, Juan Pablo Anaya, and Enrique Hacklib – who participated in the construction of the project's website as well as of *Culture Machine's* new design and maintenance between 2017 and 2020.

[x] For 'non-inhuman' approaches to writing see Culture Machine's issue on *Anthropocene Infrapolitics*, especially the contribution by Spanish philosopher Alberto Moreiras.

[xi] This aspect of the resulting book, titled *Ecological Rewriting: Situated Engagements with the Chernobyl Herbarium*, can be best appreciated at:
https://ecologicalrewritings.pubpub.org/pub/reuse-rewrite-disappropriate/release/3

[xii] In the post-pandemic UK, for example, where conservative political classes have been withdrawing financial support from culture, arts, and universities, Hall (2022) argues against simply demanding the return of such state support without first questioning the historic reproduction of inequalities through liberal humanist (or bourgeois) understandings of culture, arts, and the universities. This is in a context where, as Hall documents, the largest proportion of financial support has gone to the upper and middle classes attending private schools. Defunding culture, in this context, could very well be embraced as, in the US, 'defund the police', in the sense of a democratic redistribution of public resources so that communities themselves –rather than hierarchical institutions historically configured by racism and colonialism, and still in the service of anti-democratic elites – take charge of their needs or their 'commons', including security and culture.