Say 'Yes!' to peer review: Open Access publishing and the need for mutual aid in academia

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Reflections: On Publishing

Say 'Yes!' to peer review: Open Access publishing and the need for mutual aid in academia

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Scholars are increasingly declining to offer their services in the peer review process. There are myriad reasons for this refusal, most notably the ever-increasing pressure placed on academics to publish within the neoliberal university. Yet if you are publishing yourself then you necessarily expect someone else to review your work, which begs the question as to why this service is not being reciprocated. There is something to be said about withholding one's labour when journals are under corporate control, but when it comes to Open Access journals such denial is effectively unacceptable. Make time for it, as others have made time for you. As editors of the independent, Open Access, non-corporate journal *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies*, we reflect on the struggles facing our daily operations, where scholars declining to participate in peer review is the biggest obstacle we face. We argue that peer review should be considered as a form of mutual aid, which is rooted in an ethics of cooperation. The system only works if you say 'Yes!'.

Keywords: critical geographies, mutual aid, neoliberal university, Open Access, peer review, publishing

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ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies is a journal that was founded on the principle of providing an Open Access platform for critical geographical scholarship as a means of reclaiming our collective labour from the corporate stranglehold that currently defines most of contemporary academia (Moss *et al.* 2002). Open Access publishing should go hand in hand with a collective

organizational form and supportive ethos, which is a key component of *ACME*'s identity. Functioning as a collective is not intrinsic to the Open Access model. Instead, it is a choice, and a political one at that. A collective approach goes hand in hand with a number of risks and opportunities including, most notably the human dimension. It requires a high level of trust, interdependence, commitment to open lines of communication, and horizontal organization (Springer 2014). There are also financial concerns, as we have to seek external funding, which comes from the Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) of Canada, who have particular nationalist criteria that we do not necessarily agree with and yet necessarily have to fulfill. While a spirit of independence is central to the mission of the journal, like all collectives we require sustainable funding to survive, and thus make a concession about maintaining the requisite number of editors based in Canada.

Yet the primary challenge with *ACME* is not keeping our heads above water financially, even if this frequently weighs heavy on our minds. It is the day-to-day challenges of peer review that occupies most of our time and is the Achilles' heel of our entire operation. In short, we rely on mutual aid (Kropotkin 1902 [2008]), or mutually beneficial cooperation, which requires an ethic of commitment and a willingness to participate among the scholarly community we service. In this regard, the idea that *ACME* is a collective extends beyond the Editorial Collective and the International Advisory Board we maintain, and includes anyone who reads and/or publishes in the journal. Unfortunately, in recent years we have experienced a rampant lack of willingness to review papers. While we don't want to name and shame, we are astonished that so many of our authors, and sadly even some of our International Advisory Board members, routinely refuse to provide us with reviews. In order to sustain the efforts of the journal we absolutely rely on a system of reciprocity and good will.

Given our limited funding, none of the editors receive a stipend for the labour we put into the journal. It is a huge responsibility that requires an extraordinary time commitment, but we are dedicated to our area of study, to supporting the work of other scholars, and to providing the knowledge that is produced free of charge to the general public. We don't have the means to offer any other enticements. For example, some journals offer discount vouchers for books by the same publisher. Other journals offer free access to the journal a referee reviews for, which seems somewhat perverse from our perspective, since we offer free access to all. Unlike the competition, when we ask people to commit to peer review, it is not an exploitative relationship that puts further profits into the pockets of an overpaid CEO. It is a simple request to commit to the ethics of cooperation, and to view the production of knowledge and the vitality of academic life as more than a capitalist transaction (Soley 1995).

Very simply, *ACME* is working from the premise that people should have bigger hearts for peer review when it comes to Open Access. While we appreciate that people are busy, and the strains of the neoliberal academy puts undue pressures on our time and well being (Jubas 2012; Berg *et al.* 2016), it is ok to slow things down and take a trail-moseying approach in response (Mountz *et al.* 2014). We also feel that saying 'yes' to an Open Access journal when it comes to peer review raises a larger set of ethical considerations. When it comes to corporate publishers, we understand the hesitations that come with knowing that one's labour is being abused. Many of us still agree to participate in the process because of an affinity for our field of study and a concern for supporting other authors, but we are usually also acutely aware that someone is profiting off our collective work, which gives reason for pause. Yet with independent Open Access journals like *ACME* there is an entirely different set of relations at stake. If critical geography is concerned with envisioning a better world beyond the current neoliberal nightmare (Castree 2000; Blomley 2006), commitment to peer review for Open Access journals is about valuing the means of realizing this goal. It is a prefigurative politics of possibility (Ince 2012; Springer *et al.* 2012).

Finding reviewers is super hard work. If you have ever wondered why it takes several months to get reviews back on a paper, it has very little to do with how long it takes people to read and respond, and almost everything to do with the undertaking of finding willing participants. Securing reviewers is a task that keeps getting harder and harder. This sentiment remains true regardless of whether a journal is Open Access or not, and is perhaps mostly due to the intensifying pressure to publish within the contemporary academy. People really are overburdened, and the result is a prioritization of responsibilities. Unfortunately this ranking of commitments often comes at the expense of the greater

good. We understand that this is part and parcel of the neoliberalization of academia, where we all become rationalizing subjects, but there is a distinct need to push back and to continue to contribute to the sharing economy of peer review (Hall & Ince 2017).

We feel that reviewing should be taken seriously as a political decision and not only as strategic for forwarding one's own career (Kallio 2017). It should be treated as an expression of mutual aid. In other words, peer review should proceed as reciprocity by reviewing for journals where one has published, reviewing as explicit support for the journals we love, and encouraging (not imposing) an open review process, as a more personal, constructive, and responsible approach to scholarship that defies the spirit of competition (Zabel 2017). It is about making room for a plurality of voices, rather than a toeing of particular lines or making a spoof out of the process (see Bohannon 2013). All of us – intentionally or not – are now part of the problem. However, we can also be a part of the solution. So framing peer review as a practice of mutual aid should change our outlook, but only when reciprocity works horizontally, not as a guilt-inducing, exploitative, or instrumentalized framework. Such a view also changes the role of an editor. *ACME* has developed an idea of 'shepherding' a paper towards publication (especially when the author is an emerging scholar, or a non-Anglo researcher writing in English). This requires greater attention to the notion of 'care' as a means of also being 'open' (Lawson 2009).

It is important to reflect on the idea of 'Open Access' beyond the narrow definition of simply being work that is 'not hidden behind a paywall.' Open Access is also about a Creative Commons licence and creating the conditions for the dissemination of knowledge. It is about more creative forms of writing (such as poetry) (McCann 2015; Boyd 2017), and creative expression (such as video and art) (de Leeuw & Craig 2017; Mason 2017). It is about welcoming non-Anglo theoretical traditions (Díaz-Cortés & Sequera 2015), breaking with Eurocentric conventions (Vasquez-Fernandez *et al.* 2017), and not just promoting non-Anglo work in an Anglo context, but promoting especially, multilingualism to open up ideas beyond the Anglo scene (de Araújo & Germes 2016). Such an approach creates Open Access insofar as Anglo readers rarely read beyond the Anglo world. *ACME* is an English journal (so it is read and recognized by Anglophone academia) but is also much more than that. We publish articles in many other languages, thus allowing our articles to be read more broadly in facilitating a more horizontal circulation of knowledge (see Springer 2016, which *ACME* published in 12 languages).

Open Access is deeply political. For us, it is fundamentally about defending and protecting certain ideals about what research should be, a necessary step towards what must be done to fight against the cynical and savage version of academia that we have created for ourselves (Berg *et al.* 2014). To critique and learn from the work of others is vital for the wheel of knowledge production to keep turning, and for that to happen, we need research to be accessible and open to all. It means embracing a form of anarchist thinking and organizing in the sense of not having to wait for the great answers or magic solutions, but rather to start looking for the small things that we can do that change our immediate surroundings in the here and now (Springer 2012). This 'Do-It-Yourself' ethos is part of this picture for *ACME*. It starts with making a collective effort to find creative ways to convince people of the value of not-for-profit peer reviewing as a realization of mutual aid. As former *ACME* Editor Katherine McKittrick once said, "mutuality is the lifeblood of radical journals." Accordingly, we must remember that none of us are anything without those who preceded us, and we are also nothing without those who will follow in our footsteps. And so we ask you to consider, what path do we want future generations to traverse?

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