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## *Chapter Thirteen*

# **Canadian Comparative Literature in Bits**

*The Impact of Open Access and  
Electronic Publication Formats*

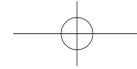
Markus Reisenleitner

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About 15 years ago, over a friendly breakfast conversation in a small B&B in the United States, I was asked what I did for a living by another guest. When I explained that I was a professor, this was acknowledged with an approving nod and the statement, “Ah, so you are in the education business.” “I’m afraid that’s what it is increasingly turning into,” I replied.

**[13.1]**

Nowhere has the commodification of knowledge, which has turned universities in both their teaching and research mandates into businesses over the last decades, had as strong an impact as in the area of academic publishing. While the transformation of academic publishing to digital formats was supposed to allow for increased access and dissemination at a reduced cost (no printing costs, no mailing, etc.), the opposite happened: “In 2015, the global academic journal market was estimated at \$10 billion, with a very large chunk of that going to profit, not costs” (Bastian). Academic publishing oligopolies have consolidated an expanding market and now typically reap profit margins of 40 percent. A recent study (Larivière et al.) meticulously traces the steady increase in market share of the main players in both the Natural/Medical Sciences and the Social Sciences and Humanities. While it is often assumed that this situation was spearheaded by the sciences and their fixation on impact factors, journal rankings, and other forms of quantitative assessment, the numbers do not bear this out, on the contrary:



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In the SSH, the concentration increased even more dramatically [...] in 2013, Elsevier accounts for 16.4 percent of all SSH papers (4.4 fold increase since 1990), Taylor & Francis for 12.4 percent (16 fold increase), Wiley-Blackwell for 12.1 percent (3.8 fold increase), Springer for 7.1 percent (21.3 fold increase), and Sage Publications for 6.4 percent (4 fold increase). On the whole, for these two broad domains of scholarly knowledge, five publishers account for more than half of today’s published journal output. (Larivière et al.)

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Elsevier, Taylor & Francis, Wiley-Blackwell, Springer, and Sage are all private, i.e. for-profit companies rather than university presses or publishing branches of scholarly societies. However, it is true that this increase occurred largely on the social sciences side: “papers in arts and humanities are still largely dispersed amongst many smaller publishers, with the top five commercial publishers only accounting for 20 percent of humanities papers and 10 percent of arts papers in 2013, despite a small increase since the second half of the 1990s” (Larivière et al.).

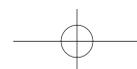
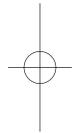
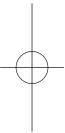
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Why commercial publishers have cornered this market is evident. Publicly funded research conducted by university faculty, written up by authors who do not get paid specifically for the writing of the work in question, reviewed for free by academics who consider this part of their job description, copy-edited by low-wage, part-time yet highly educated contract workers, and distributed through relatively low-cost digital infrastructure, then copyright- and paywall-protected and packaged into ever-more expensive subscription bundles sold to publicly funded libraries with little choice if they want to fulfill their mission, provides a tempting business model for those who are in a position to control the dissemination networks. As a CBC news feature on academic publishing for profit states blithely: “The quality control is free, the raw material is free, and then you charge very, very high amounts—of course you come up with very high profit margins” (“Academic Publishers Reap Huge Profits as Libraries Go Broke | CBC News”).

[13.4]

What seems less obvious is why academics and the general public have played along. As is often the case in complex, overdetermined cultural practices, a knotty convergence of factors needs to be disentangled to account for these developments. Diminished funding for public universities across Europe and North America and reduced job opportunities for newly minted academics have created an academic precariat with little choice but to follow the rules of an academic reward system of assessment, recruitment, and gatekeeping increasingly reliant on quantifiable performance indicators such as journal rankings and impact factors provided by the algorithms of for-profit companies such as Elsevier and Thompson-Reuters. The rise of a managerial class of academic administrators who support almost exclusively research that can be monetized and who often treat the university itself as a company aimed at profit maximization has contributed to an imaginary of tertiary education that supports the privatization of knowledge and strict

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mechanisms of access management. Ever more sophisticated ways of controlling the flow of information on the internet have provided the technological underpinnings of this system, supported by strict legal frameworks set up to enforce copyright and other authors' rights, such as translation, distribution, access, and attribution, that are routinely transferred to publishers as part of publication contracts. These are just some of the factors that have created an environment in which knowledge generated by scholarship has become a valuable commodity.

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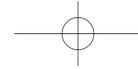
This is not the place to analyze in more detail the tendencies and trajectories of the global academy that have led to what amounts to gross distortions of power and access in the dissemination of scholarship in favor of private, for-profit companies during the 21st century. What is now starting to impact Comparative Literature in Canada is the by now very public backlash against this form of private profiteering from academic publishing. This backlash has emphasized Open Access publication models as an alternative to for-profit publications by global publishing oligopolies, hearkening back to pre-commoditized imaginaries of the internet as a freely accessible public space of sharing and exchange. Open access publishing is gaining ground as a response to the monopolization of the academic publishing landscape and is welcomed by libraries, funding agencies, and many academics who are suspicious of the gatekeeping role of big publishing conglomerates such as Elsevier. Definitions of Open Access are contested and varied, but in its initial, and most frequently cited, form, the principles are stated clearly:

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By "open access" to [peer-reviewed research literature], we mean its free availability on the public internet, permitting any users to read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of these articles, crawl them for indexing, pass them as data to software, or use them for any other lawful purpose, without financial, legal, or technical barriers other than those inseparable from gaining access to the internet itself. The only constraint on reproduction and distribution, and the only role for copyright in this domain, should be to give authors control over the integrity of their work and the right to be properly acknowledged and cited. (Budapest Open Access Initiative | Ten Years on from the Budapest Open Access Initiative)

[13.8]

This definition, which emerged from a 2002 networking conference sponsored by the Soros-funded Open Society Foundation, has become customary for the publication stipulations of private foundations such as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation ("Open Access Policy") and the Wellcome Trust (*Open Access Policy* | *Wellcome*), but more recently it has entered into discussions at the national level as well. When German institutions did not renew their Elsevier contracts in 2017 ("German Universities Plan for Life Without Elsevier"), many major media outlets around the world took notice of the situation. Similar library initiatives have been started in other countries



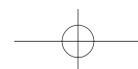
(e.g., Australia (Davey), France (Kwon), Sweden (Wentzel), and Finland (Susi)), and as a result, national granting agencies have started to mandate that results of funded research and scholarship need to be made available in open access form. On 4 September 2018, the European Commission launched “Plan S” and “cOAlition S,” “a coalition of national research funders [...] committed to accelerate this transition to open access” (“Plan S’ and ‘cOAlition S’—Accelerating the Transition to Full and Immediate Open Access to Scientific Publications”). The key stipulation of the initiative is that “After 1 January 2020 scientific publications on the results from research funded by public grants provided by national and European research councils and funding bodies must be published in compliant Open Access Journals or on compliant Open Access Platforms” (“Plan S’ and ‘cOAlition S’—Accelerating the Transition to Full and Immediate Open Access to Scientific Publications”).

Backed by 11 national funding agencies as well as the European Commission, and including compliance monitoring as well as sanctions among their principles, Coalition S aims squarely at the subscription business model that has led Elsevier, Springer, et al to market dominance (Else). While it is too early to tell how sustainable the momentum towards Open Access will be, the shift has already spawned numerous forms of co-optation and monetization, reaching from predatory journals that promise quick turnaround and sham peer reviews targeting inexperienced academics desperate for publications, to astronomical “author fees” charged by established publishers that shift their sources of revenue from library subscriptions to charging subsidies for open access, thus forcing academics (mostly from the science side) to build those fees into their grant applications.

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In Canada, the Tri-Council Agency has similarly introduced an (albeit somewhat less strict) Open Access policy, which stipulates that “[g]rant recipients are required to ensure that any peer-reviewed journal publications arising from Agency-supported research are freely accessible within 12 months of publication” (Government of Canada), either by depositing their final, peer-reviewed manuscripts in a depository or by publishing in journals that offer open access within 12 months of publication. These top-down Canadian Open Access initiatives build on a solid, two-decades-in-the-making technological infrastructure facilitated by two parallel projects in different parts of the country. The Public Knowledge Project (PKP), a multi-university initiative founded in 1998 and centered at Simon Fraser University, has developed software to facilitate the management, workflow, and publishing elements in Open Access initiatives for academic conferences, journals, and monographs (<https://pkp.sfu.ca/about/history/>). Despite the rather steep learning curve their platform, which includes the Open Journal Systems and the Open Monograph Systems, imposes on its users, adoption has been widespread, not only in Canada but across the world: “As of mid-

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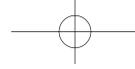
2015, OJS was being used by at least 8,000 journals worldwide. [...] A survey in 2010 found that about half were in the developing world” (“Open Journal Systems”; see also Edgar and Willinsky and OJSMap).

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The second initiative originated in the French-speaking part of Canada. Érudit (erudit.org), launched in 1998 (the same year PKP was established) by the Université de Montréal, has not focused as much on workflow itself as on the digital distribution of scholarly journals (*History | Érudit*; see also Beaudry et al.). Unlike the PKP, it concentrates on social sciences and humanities publications and presents itself in a much more stylish and corporate manner, with the motto “cultivez votre savoir/ cultivate your knowledge,” than the hacker-inspired aesthetics of OJS. Érudit focuses on the marketing of Canadian scholarship. Journals applying to be included in the platform have to fulfill a number of criteria, which include peer review, the editor-in-chief being a professor at a Canadian post-secondary institution, and a third of the journal’s editorial board being affiliated with a Canadian post-secondary institution. While its historical concentration on publications in French is still noticeable, the platform has by now become more or less consistently bilingual.

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PKP and Érudit have worked towards a solid, coordinated foundation for providing alternatives to the infrastructure and services that commercial publishers deliver. They leverage the affordances of digital publishing without (at least so far) prioritizing its monetization, which makes them extremely relevant for the Open Access movement in Canada. This has recently resulted in the collaboration of the two projects in the coalition publi.ca, which is set to become fully operational in 2019. The partnership’s mission statement makes it very clear that it aims to provide a counterbalance to the commercialization of academic publishing: “The creation of Coalition Publi.ca is the Canadian manifestation of an emerging international movement redefining the power dynamic in the field of scholarly publishing in support of a free and open circulation of knowledge. It aims to support the HSS scholarly community in the context of a transition toward open access and of significant budget cuts” (*Coalition Publi.Ca | Érudit*). Coalition publi.ca is somewhat atypical in its prioritizing SSH publications over the sciences and life sciences, which is of interest to the positioning of Open Access publishing in Comparative Literature as a multilingual, theory-oriented Humanities discipline and scholarly practice. The next part of my contribution will consider what consequences the shifting environment of publishing academic work could have for Comparative Literature in Canada.



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While the global tendencies of metrics, ranked journals and market concentration have not bypassed the Humanities in Canada, there is still considerable variety in how the results of research and scholarship reach their audience in the scholarly community and the classroom. Monographs, edited collections, and print journals produced by small imprints are still not unusual in the Canadian context, bucking the global trend that links the production of Theory with a capital T, which was spearheaded by American Comparative Literature departments during the last decades of the last century (see Cusset), to centralized and commercially successful fora of debate in journals, edited collections and textbooks produced by publishers such as Routledge in a British- or American-inflected English as the global neoliberal academy's lingua franca. For the Australian context, Meaghan Morris observes trenchantly:

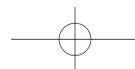
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While bloggers can write as they please for those with the means to read them, an export-driven federal research funding policy—together with what Lindsay Waters aptly calls the “outsourcing” by universities of their assessment procedures to international corporations bulk-producing refereed journals and books—inexorably pressures Australian critics who seek an academic base to sell their work in the first instance to trans-Atlantic readers as a condition of its publication and thus, in the fullness of time, its distribution to Australians. (Morris 4)

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Canadian Comparative Literature's uneasy relationships to scholarly practices, publications, and associations south of the border and over the “pond” mirror the Australian situation Morris describes, but the comparatively (vis-à-vis Australia and New Zealand) less brutal impact of neoliberal managerial knowledge regimes on Canadian universities has also enabled Canadian Comparative Literature to maintain, for better or worse, its idiosyncratic traditions and lineages, which have emphasized bilingualism, multilingualism, and broad transdisciplinary orientations that extend beyond “the literary.” The Canadian Comparative Literature Association/ L'Association Canadienne de Littérature Comparée (CCLA/ACLC) has studiously avoided the elitism, gatekeeping, and disciplinary constrictions and entrenchments that its American counterparts, the American Comparative Literature Association and the Modern Language Association, have developed under the banner of professionalization and expert recognition. The principal publication venues for comparatists in Canada have remained under the purview of university presses (such as *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, which is published by the University of Manitoba and was formerly subtitled “A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature”) or, alternatively, forego

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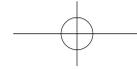
an affiliation with a publisher completely, such as the official journal of the CCLA/ACLC, the *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature/ Revue canadienne de littérature comparée*. Both *Mosaic* and the *Review* still produce print copies of their issues and generate revenue from individual and library subscriptions as well as their distribution in digital format through aggregators such as EBSCO Information Systems.

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The situation of Comparative Literature in Canada might thus be considered an instructive case for the possibilities for, but also the obstacles working against, an Open Access model of scholarly publishing. Editorial board selection, control, and initiative without the imperatives of market pressures as well as peer feedback after publication are easy to implement in digital Open Access formats, more easily than in print media, and could thus be a crucial incentive for comparatists and other Humanities scholars to move towards Open Access. A relatively stable if underfunded structure of professional organizations based on membership dues in Canada, a decentralized and multifaceted system of individual and institutional assessment (Canadian universities are under provincial, not federal, authority), and defensive policies against American encroachments have produced a context in which quality assurance has not been outsourced to or centralized with big players such as Routledge (the target of acquisition for the Taylor & Francis group in 1998). The distribution of scholarship has more or less remained under the control of journals and their editors. However, this has also led to a certain hesitance to, or even resistance against, digital-only forms of distribution and reliance on the comparatively small but predictable revenue that print production and subscription models on an individual basis provide. The small-scale production of publications in the Comparative Literature context (which includes books, both monographs and edited collections, as well as journals) demonstrates that production skills and distribution networks need not be transferred to commercial publishers to maintain quality in form and content, and typesetting, copyediting, distribution, and marketing do not need to be outsourced to a contingent labor precariat under the control of those publishers. Rather, production can be kept inside the networks that academic versions of training, apprenticeship, and collaboration have relied on for a long time. But the traditional models of publications, particularly in the Humanities, still remain mired in forms of elitism and access control inherent in print production and its business models, something that Open Access might be able to prevail over.

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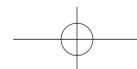
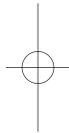
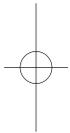
While the basis for an Open Access model in Canadian Comparative Literature seems to be firmly established both in the sense of the technological infrastructure and through federal funding regulations and incentives, it is thus neither an obvious nor an easy move for an intellectual, pedagogical, and scholarly practice with a decades-long tradition, and not only because some of the scholars just prefer to read on paper. Edited collections and



monographs are hardly present in Open Access initiatives, but they remain a popular format for comparatists as a format of distribution that provides intellectual coherence and brings together case studies and theoretical and methodological approaches that lend themselves to comparison across cultures, times, genres, and languages. On the other hand, the monad-like referred journal article around which Open Access infrastructure is often premised has played a less important role in this framework despite moves in that direction, such as PKP's Open Monograph Press. The format of the single, peer-reviewed article lends itself to the fierce, sport contest-like competition that the global academy has turned into in many parts, encouraging the normalizing pressures and homogenizing languages of citation canons and routinely wielded instruments of "critique" that can be applied to any material whatever. On the other hand, the often heterogeneous and uneven but wide-ranging and comparative scholarship characteristic of edited collections (and in some instances, single or co-authored monographs) facilitates approaches well-established in the Humanities, and maybe particularly in Comparative Literature.

This is not in itself an obstacle to moving Comparative Literature towards Open Access. Journals can emphasize special issues over non-thematic collections of articles, and there is by now a solid technological foundation for producing ebooks. However, if we want to engage "technologies as things we think with and not just through or about" (Broekhuizen et al. 6), it is important to acknowledge that a move towards Open Access also entails a move towards digital production and narrows, in the existing environment, the format towards privileging the "double-blind" peer-reviewed journal article, which, in academic and especially academic administrators' common sense, provides the gate-keeping and quality control that differentiates it from the rest of the random, ephemeral, and banal texts and images floating around the internet. While it is obviously important not to "completely rethink everything at the same time" (Broekhuizen et al. 8), the move to Open Access, for perfectly good reasons of quality assurance and because of the hegemony of scientific research in the debates, has thus limited, rather than extended, what "counts" as an academic publication, i.e. constricted it to the peer-reviewed, mostly single-authored journal article. The discussion about what constitutes an academic publication (and what constitutes quality in an academic publication and how it differentiates itself from other forms of text production in the digital age) is clearly important and, in an Open Access environment, has the potential to be reclaimed from commercial publishers as intermediaries. However, quality assurance cannot, and should not, be reduced to the currently institutionalized model of peer review, which is anonymous, normalizing, sometimes confrontational to the point of insult, and deserves to be abolished, according to Mieke Bal, for at least ten very good reasons, beginning with the heavy burden it puts on already heavily

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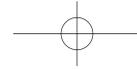
burdened scholars and ending with the fact that it is anchored in an *authoritative* mentality with serious social ramifications (Bal, italics in original).

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Quality assurance is not limited to the level of content, however. Part of the “service” publishers have traditionally offered includes managing the review process, copyediting, formatting, layout, typesetting, proofreading, and electronic distribution and archiving (as well as, in traditional formats, printing). With current technology, none of these tasks except the actual printing requires substantial infrastructure, job-specific training, or software investment. As a consequence, these jobs are routinely outsourced to an academic precariat of often Humanities-trained graduate students or graduates with different levels of competence and skills. Open Access in principle makes it possible to reclaim control over these processes because academics who are journal or series editors have more direct access to graduate students and could train them more specifically than commercial publishers. University presses have traditionally profited from this. But in a context of limited funding, there is a real danger that bypassing commercial publishers will merely replicate or even aggravate unethical and exploitative labor practices in the limited funding environment of universities and Humanities departments in Canada. While initiatives such as the coalition publi.ca provide support for workflow management, distribution, and archiving, the actual copyediting and proofreading still necessitate investment in labor that full-time faculty often do not have time for, while typesetting and layout require skills that many academics do not have and do not want to acquire. Yet the move towards thinking of academic publishing not so much as a part of a knowledge economy but rather as an “academic gift economy” (Hall, loc. 61) that Open Access has the potential to foster cannot ethically be built on the hidden exploitation of a surplus reservoir of academic labor.

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If Open Access is to provide alternatives to the scholarly communication models of the neoliberal managerial global academy, it needs to develop structures and platforms that work towards a publishing commons in which knowledge production and dissemination processes are rigorous yet non-hierarchical, thorough yet experimental, and expert yet non-compartmentalized. Academic publishing that sees itself as contributing to the decolonization and democratization of knowledge, and feels bound by an ethics of care concerning the labor that goes into it, thus needs to develop holistic approaches to the many moving parts required to circulate the results of research and scholarship, from accessible and correct language usage and translation to competence in typesetting and content management software. In this respect, the “maker” aspects that have characterized training in the digital humanities for a while now can provide some useful models. If the training graduate students receive in the Humanities included the technical aspects of the academic publishing process as well as academic writing, which is entirely feasible with current infrastructure and software, Open



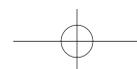
Access could be the first step in re-imagining knowledge production as a collaborative, accountable, commons-based process of knowledge generation and sharing that disrupts the smooth and even spaces of commercially controlled scholarly communication in scientific English, a way of “denaturalising and destabilising notions of individual rights, property, copyright and so on that we otherwise take for granted” (Broekhuizen et al. 9).

Unlike its European counterparts, Canadian Comparative Literature as an academic formation and somewhat unruly, undisciplined discipline, has a specific history of transgressing language and disciplinary boundaries and advancing innovative methodological and theoretical paradigms. At the moment of writing, the Canadian academic environment provides a unique and potentially exemplary context to re-imagine the future of decolonizing and democratizing research and knowledge creation in the Humanities through Open Access, and Comparative Literature has the potential to be at the forefront of the movement.

The biggest potential impact won’t come from cost savings, though. That would come from reducing the value placed on high impact factor journals and boosting non-subscription open access publishing. And that requires academics in influential parts of the ecosystem to change. They, after all, choose how they publish their societies’ journals, where they submit articles, for whom they volunteer peer-review and editing services, and how they reward peers. Access to subscription journals has always been patchy globally, and for everyone not aligned to institutions that can pay for them. Jolting the luckiest parts of academia from the comfort of being able to ignore this could change everything (Bastian).

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