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‘Force of Binding: On Liquid, Living Books (Version 2.0: Mark Amerika Mix)’

What is the unbound book? Can the book be unbound?

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Is *remixthebook*, with its literary, philosophical, theoretical, artistic and poetic mash-ups and accompanying website where visual artists, theorists, new media scholars, philosophers and musicians sample source material, ‘postproducing it into their own remix/theory performances’, a book unbound?

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The Oxford Online Dictionary defines the term ‘bound’ as follows:

> ‘bound *in* bind …tie or fasten (something) tightly together…;
> *… walk or run with leaping strides…; …a territorial limit; a boundary…;*
> *… going or ready to go towards a specified place…; …past and past participle of bind…’*

In which case the unbound book would be one that:

> *had* been gathered together and firmly secured, as a pile of pages can be to form a print-on-paper codex volume;
>
> *had* a certain destiny or destination or had been prepared, going, or ready to go toward a specific place (as in ‘homeward bound’), such as perhaps an intended addressee, known reader or identifiable and controllable audience;

> and *had* been springing forward or progressing toward that place or destiny in leaps and bounds.

Had because the use of the past participle suggests such binding is history as far as the book is concerned. Today, in the era of online authorship, comment sections, discussion forums, social tags, RSS feeds, YouTube clips, augmented reality, interactive information visualisations, geolocation search capabilities, crowd sourcing, remixes, mash-ups, and texts being generally connected to a network of other information, data and mobile media environments, the book is being disrupted, dislocated, dispersed. So much so that if the book is to have any future at all in the context of these other supports and modes of reading and writing, it will be in unbound form; a form which, while radically transforming the book, may yet serve to save it and keep it alive.

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As we know from Ulises Carrión, however, there's no such thing as an unbound book. 'A writer… does not write texts', he declares in 'The New Art of Making Books':

> A writer writes texts.
>
> The fact, that a text is contained in a book, comes only from the dimensions of such a text; or, in the case of a series of short texts (poems, for instance), from their number.

The book is just a container for text. The idea of binding is thus essential to the book.

Tempting though it may be, then, we can't say that whereas in the past the book *had* been bound it isn't anymore and that, after centuries of print, such conventional notions of the book have now become outdated. We can't say this, not just because e-books and iPad apps -- while offering different types of binding to printed books, different ways of tying pages together and establishing what is and what is not out of bounds -- nevertheless reinforce rather conservative, papercentric notions of bookishness that make their identities just as closed, fixed, stable, locked-down and certain in their own ways as those of the scroll and codex book (for authors and publishers, but also for readers). That's one reason, to be sure. The main reason we can't say this, however, is because an unbound book is quite simply no longer a book. Without a binding, without being tied or fastened tightly together, a writer's text is not a book at all: it is just a text or collection of texts. A text is only a book when it is bound.

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Carrion's primary concern of course was with the conception of the book as an object (a series of pages both divided and gathered together in a coherent, and usually numbered, sequence), and with its material forms of support and fabrication (paper, binding, printing, ink, typography, layout and so forth). Is it possible therefore that, rather than in ontological terms, the idea of the unbound book can be addressed more productively via one of the other senses in which books can be said to be tied? I am thinking specifically in terms of legal contracts. These function to establish territorial boundaries marking when certain potential ideas and actions relating to the book are 'out of bounds', forbidden, limited by restrictions and regulations (concerning copyright, Intellectual Property, notions of authorship, attribution and so on).

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A 2007 article by McKenzie Wark, 'Copyright, Copyleft, Copygift', offers an interesting starting point for thinking about this aspect of the book. In it Wark addresses the contradiction involved in his having on the one hand written a book against the idea of intellectual property, *A Hacker Manifesto*, and on the other published it with an established academic press, Harvard, which refused to allow him to release it under a Creative Commons license as part of the new, emergent, digital gift economy. Wark's solution was to 'Live the contradictions!' between commodity and gift culture, and also to carry a memory stick to speaking events so anyone who wanted a post-print copy of *A Hacker Manifesto* could get one for free from him personally, in the form of a text file they could even alter if they so wished. Nevertheless, disseminating *A Hacker Manifesto* by sneakernet - or pink Roos, in Wark's case - does little to resolve the problem he identifies: namely, how to meet an author's desire to have their work distributed to, respected and read by as many people as possible -- something a 'brand name' print press like Harvard can deliver -- while also being part of the academic gift economy.

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Surprisingly, Wark doesn't appear to have been aware of the possibility of publishing his research open access, thus making it available online for free, to anyone with access to the internet, without the need on the part of readers to pay a cover price, library subscription charge or publisher's fee. Yet even if he had been, open access would not have provided a straightforward solution to Wark's

dilemma, since there is an important difference between publishing scholarly journal articles open access and publishing books open access. As is made clear in the *Self-Archiving FAQ* written for the Budapest Open Access Initiative:

> Where exclusive copyright has been assigned by the author to a journal publisher for a peer reviewed draft, copy-edited and accepted for publication by that journal, then *that draft* may not be self-archived [on the author's own website, or in a central, subject or institutional repository] by the author (without the publisher's permission).
>
> The pre-refereeing preprint, however, [may have] already been (legally) self-archived. (No copyright transfer agreement existed at that time, for that draft.)

This is how open access is able to elude many of the problems associated with copyright or licensing restrictions with regard to articles in peer reviewed journals (assuming the journals in question are not themselves already online and open access). But 'where exclusive copyright… has been transferred... to a publisher' -- for example, 'where the author has been paid... in exchange for the text', as is generally the case in book publishing, but not with journal articles -- it may be that the author is not legally allowed to self-archive a copy of their book or any future editions derived from it open access at all. This is because, although the 'text is still the author's "intellectual property"… the exclusive right to sell or give away copies of it has been transferred to the publisher'.

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So what options are available to book authors if, like Wark, they wish to have their work read beyond a certain 'underground' level (in Wark's case that associated with net art and net theory), while at the same time being part of the academic gift economy?

1. Authors can publish with an open access press such as Australian National University's ANU E Press, Athabasca University's AU Press or Open Book Publishers. Graham Harman brought out *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics* with re.press, for instance, with John Carlos Rowe's *The Cultural Politics of the New American Studies* shortly due to appear from Open Humanities Press, while Lev Manovich is publishing his new book *Info-Aesthetics* with Bloomsbury Academic, all of which are open access presses. Still, with the best will in the world, few open access book publishers are already established and prestigious

enough to have the kind of ‘brand name’ equivalence to Harvard that Wark desires.

2. Authors can insist on signing only a non-exclusive contract with a press, one that *would* allow them to self-archive a peer-reviewed and perhaps even copy-edited version of their book. The difficulty, of course, is in finding a ‘brand name’ publisher willing to agree to this.

3. Authors can endeavour to negotiate with such a press -- as Wark did with Harvard -- to see if they would be willing to make the published version of their book available for free online, with *only* the printed version available for sale. Ted Striphas is an author who, with *The Late Age of Print*, has published a book with Columbia University Press in this fashion. However, such instances often seem to be regarded by publishers as little more than one-off experiments.

4. Authors can adopt a variation of the strategy advocated on the *Self-Archiving FAQ* written for the Budapest Open Access Initiative with regard to scholarly journal articles. This is simply ‘“don't-ask/don't-tell”’. Instead, publish with whichever publisher you like, self-archive the full text ‘and wait to see whether the publisher ever requests removal’.

5. Either that or, if all else fails, author’s can wait for someone to publish a ‘pirate’ copy of this book on Aaaaarg.org.

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Noticeably, however, all these strategies in effect fasten what are identified -- conceptually, materially and economically -- as finished, unified and bound books in legal binds; they are just different ways of negotiating such binds. What though if book authors were to pursue ways of openly publishing their research *before* it is tied up so tightly?

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To test this, last year I began experimenting with what I am calling an Open Humanities Notebook, taking as one model for doing so the Open Notebook Science of the organic chemist Jean-Claude Bradley. As was emphasized in a 2010 interview with Richard Poynder on the impact of open notebook science, Bradley is making the ‘details of every experiment done in his lab’ - i.e. the whole research process, not just the findings – freely available to the public on the web. This ‘includes all the data generated from these experiments too, even

the failed experiments'. What is more, he is doing so in 'real time', 'within hours of production, not after the months or years involved in peer review'.

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Given that one of my books-in-progress deals with a series of projects which use digital media to actualise, or creatively perform, critical and cultural theory, I decided to make the research for this volume freely available online in such an Open Notebook. I am doing so more or less as this research emerges, not just in draft and pre-print form as journal articles, book chapters, catalogue essays and so on, but also as contributions to email discussions, conference papers, lectures. Long *before* any of these texts are collected together and given to a publisher to be bound as a book, economically, materially and conceptually, then.

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As is the case with Bradley's Notebook, this Open Humanities Notebook offers a space where the research for this volume, provisionally titled *Media Gifts*, can be disseminated quickly and easily in a manner that enables it to be openly shared and discussed. More than that, though, it provides an opportunity to experiment critically with loosening at least some of the ties used to bind books once a text has been contracted by a professional press.

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For instance, it is common for most book contracts to allow authors to retain the right to republish in their own works material that has previously appeared elsewhere (as scholarly articles in peer-reviewed journals, say), provided the necessary permissions have been granted. But what if draft or pre-print versions of the chapters that make up my book are gathered together in this Open Notebook? When it comes to publishing this research as a bound book, are 'brand name' presses likely to reject it on the grounds of reduced potential sales since a version of the material will already be available online? Will I be required to remove this material to ensure they *have* the exclusive right to sell or give away copies?

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At what point does the material that goes to make up a book become bound tightly enough for it to be understood as actually making up a book? Where in practice is the line going to be drawn?

And what if some of this material is disseminated out of sequence, under different titles, in other versions, forms and places where it is not quite so easy to bind, legally, economically or conceptually, as a book? Let us take as an example the version of the chapter in *Media Gifts* that explores the idea of Liquid Books. This appears as part of an actual Liquid Book that is published using a wiki, and is free for users to read, comment upon, rewrite, remix and reinvent. Similarly, the chapter on pirate philosophy is currently only available on a 'pirate' peer-to-peer network. There is no 'original' or 'master' copy of this text in the conventional sense: this text exists only to the extent *it is part of a 'pirate network'* and is stolen or 'pirated'.

Indeed, while each of the media projects the book is concerned with – at the moment there are ten in all - constitutes a distinct project in its own right, they can also be seen as forming a dynamic network of texts, websites, archives, wikis, IPTV programmes and other internet traces. Consequently, if it is to be thought of as a book at all, it should be understood as an open, distributed and multi-location book: parts of it are to be found on a blog, others on wikis, others again on p2p networks. To adapt a phrase of Maurice Blanchot's from *The Book to Come* -- for whom Stéphane Mallarmé's '*Un Coup de dés* orients the future of the book both in the direction of the greatest dispersion and in the direction of a tension capable of *gathering* infinite diversity, by the discovery of more complex structures' -- *Media Gifts* is a book 'gathered through dispersion'.

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That said, we don't need to go quite this far in dispersing our books if we just want to establish a publishing strategy others can follow. Prior to publication Wark had already disseminated versions of *The Hacker Manifesto* on the internet as work-in-progress, by means of the nettime mailing list especially. It is a practice that is of course increasingly common today, down to the level of blog posts, emails and tweets, with most presses be willing to republish material that has previously been published in these forms. Still, what if authors provide interested readers with something as simple as a set of guidelines and links showing how such distributed constellations of texts can be bound together in a coherent, sequential form (perhaps using a collection and organisation tool such as Anthologise)? Just how dispersed, loosely gathered and structured *does* a free, open, online version of a book have to be for 'brand name' presses to be prepared to publish a bound version?

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In his essay 'The Book to Come' which can be found in the volume *Paper Machine*, Jacques Derrida asks: 'What then do we have the right to call a "book" and in what way is the question of *right*, far from being preliminary or accessory, here lodged at the very heart of the question of the book? This question is governed by the question of right, not only in its particular juridical form, but also in its semantic, political, social, and economic form – in short, in its total form'.

My question in turn is: What do we have the right not to call a 'book'?

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Dispersing our current work-in-progress will not only provide us with a way of loosening some of the legal ties that bind books, however, it may also help us to think differently about the idea of the book itself.

As Graham Harman writes on his *Object-Orientated Philosophy* blog:

> In not too many years we will have reached the point where literally anyone can publish a philosophy book in electronic form in a matter of minutes, even without the least trace of official academic credentials. I don't bemoan this at all – the great era of 17th century philosophy was dominated by non-professors, and the same thing could easily happen again. As far as publishing is concerned, what it means is that all publishing is destined to become vanity publishing. (Alberto Toscano recently pointed this out to me.) You'll just post a homemade book on line, and maybe people will download it and read it, and maybe you'll pick up some influence.

Yet what is so interesting about recent developments in electronic publishing is not that, what with open access, WordPress, Scribd, Smashwords and Aaaarg.org, producing a book is something nearly everyone can do today in a matter of minutes. It is not even that book publishing may, as a result, be steadily becoming more like blogging or vanity publication, with authority and certification provided as much by an author's reputation or readership, or the number of times a text is downloaded, cited, referenced, linked to, blogged about, tagged, bookmarked, ranked, rated or 'liked', as it is by conventional peer-review or the prestige of the press. All of those criteria still rest upon and retain fairly conventional notions of the book, the author, publication and so on. What seems much more interesting is the way certain developments in electronic publishing contain at least the potential for us to perceive the book as something that is not completely fixed, stable and unified, with definite limits

and clear material edges, but as liquid and living, open to being continually and collaboratively annotated, updated, supplemented, revised, re-ordered and reimagined. Here, what we think of as 'publication' -- whether it occurs in 'real time' or after a long period of reflection and editorial review, in print-on-paper or electronic form -- is no longer an end point but rather just a stage in an ongoing process of unfolding.

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What I have been describing in terms of work-in-progress is very much part of a new strategy for academic writing and publishing that myself and a number of others are *critically* experimenting with at the moment. One of the aims of this strategy is to move away from thinking of open access primarily in terms of scholarly journals, books and even central, subject and institutionally-based self-archiving repositories. Instead, the focus is on developing a publishing economy characterized by a multiplicity of models and modes of creating, writing, binding, collecting, grouping, storing, depositing, labelling, reading, searching and inter-acting with academic research and publications.

This new publishing strategy has its basis in a number of speculative gambles with the future. It challenges a number of long-held assumptions by suggesting, among other things:

- that the 'correct', 'proper' and most effective form for creating, publishing, disseminating and archiving academic research will be progressively difficult to determine and control. Scholars will continue to write and publish paper and papercentric texts. However, they will also distribute their research as video, film, music, photography, animation and 3-D technology and combinations thereof. (What the academic publisher Elsevier is calling the 'Article of the Future' is already pointing in this direction -- although in being based on the webpage, it actually repeats a lot of the latter's papercentrism.)

- that scholars will be far less likely to publish a piece of academic research in just one place, such as in a tightly bound book or edition of a peer-reviewed journal produced by a 'brand name' press. Again, they will no doubt still place their work in such venues. Nevertheless, their publishing strategies are likely to be far more pluralistic, distributed, multifaceted and liquid, with academics making simultaneous use of the likes of Aaaarg.org, WordPress, YouTube and iTunesU to disseminate their research in a wide variety of different places. It is even possible we will move to a situation where the same material will be part of a number

of different texts and groupings; or, as Derrida speculates in 'The Book to Come', where research will no longer be grouped according to the 'corpus or opus – not finite and separable oeuvres; groupings no longer forming texts, even, but open textual processes offered on boundless national and international networks, for the active or interactive intervention of readers turned authors, and so on'.

- that an increasing number of scholars will write and publish their research not just as long or even medium-length forms of shared attention along the lines of Amazon's Kindle Singles, Ted Books (part of the Kindle Singles imprint), The Atavist and Stanford Literary Lab pamphlets, but in modular or 'chunked' forms, too -- right down to the level of passages, paragraphs and at times even perhaps sentences. Scholars will do so to facilitate the flow of their research between different platforms and other means of support: books and journals, but also emails, blogs, podcasts, tweets, text messages, p2p file-sharing networks, e-book readers and iPad apps, places where it can be changed, updated, annotated, linked to, ripped, remixed, re-combined, reversioned and reimagined.

- that scholars will also publish and disseminate their research in beta, pre-print and grey literature form (as the Public Library of Science is already doing to a limited extent with PLoS Currents: Influenza). In other words, academics will publish and archive the pieces of paper, website or blog posts, emails or tweets on which the idea was first recorded, and any drafts or working papers that were circulated to garner comments from peers and interested parties, as well as the finished, peer-reviewed and copyedited texts.

- that many scholars and scholarly journals will publish just the data generated in the course of research, with a view to making this source material openly and rapidly available for others to shape and bind into an interpretation, narrative, argument, thesis, article or book.

- that much of the emphasis in institutional publishing, archiving and dissemination strategies will switch *from gathering together the research and data produced by scholars and making it openly accessible*, *to placing more emphasis on actively and creatively 'doing things' with the research and data that has been gathered and made openly accessible*. This will be achieved not least by both institutions and scholars offering users new ways to read, write, interpret and engage with their research and data, and in the process create new texts, objects, artefacts and performances from this source material.

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Since we are talking about distributed and multiple publishing networks, the question that needs to be raised at this point concerns the agency of both publishers and authors. Who is it that is experimenting with this new publishing economy exactly?

I am aware I have been saying 'I' quite a lot here -- as if, despite everything, I am still operating according to the model whereby the work of a writer or theorist such as myself is regarded as being conceived, created, and indeed signed by a unique, centered, stable and individualized human author, and presented for the attention of a reading audience who, even for Derrida, can 'interrogate, contradict, attack, or simply deconstruct' its logic, but who 'cannot and must not change it', as he puts it elsewhere in *Paper Machine*. Yet actually the series of projects I have been referring to as work-in-progress arises out of my collaborative relationship with a number of different groups. They include those currently acting under the names of *Culture Machine*, Open Humanities Press and the Open Media Group.

Mark Amerika should be included in this list, too, as this text has of course been written as a contribution to his *remixthebook* project. It is a remix of his 'Sentences on Remixology 1.0', which is itself a remix of Sol Lewitt's 'Sentences on Conceptual Art'. So when I say 'I' here, this also means at least all of the above.

It means more than that, though, since some of the collaborative projects we are involved with and which feature in the *Media Gifts* book are also open to being anonymously written. Remixing Amerika remixing, this time, Alfred North Whitehead, it is what might be thought of as stimulating 'the novel production of togetherness'. In this sense it is not possible to say exactly who, *or what*, 'we' are.

(Even the title of this essay and its topic were generated at least in part by others: Mark Amerika, and also the organisers of The Unbound Book conference, which was held at Amsterdam Central Library and the Royal Library in Den Haag, May, 2011, and where version 1.0 of this material was first presented.)

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‘What does it mean to go out of oneself?’Am ‘I’ unbound? Out of bounds? Is all this unbound?

I am channelling Mark Amerika again, but we should think of any contemporary writer or theorist such as myself as a medium, sampling from the vocabulary of critical thought. In fact if you pay close attention to what I am doing in this performance you will see I am mutating myself – this pseudo-autobiographical self I am performatively constructing here - into a kind of postproduction processual medium. Just think of *me* as a postproduction of presence.

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This essay began by suggesting that the word ‘book’ should not be applied to a text generated in such a way, as without being tied or fastened tightly together -- by the concept of an identifiable human author, for example -- such a text is not a book at all: it is ‘only’ a text or collection of texts.

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To sample Sol Lewitt, we could say that one usually understands the texts of the present by applying the conventions of the past, thus misunderstanding the texts of the present. That, indeed, is one of the problems with a word such as ‘book’. When it is used -- even in the form of e-book, ‘unbound book’, ‘unbook’ or ‘the book to come’ -- it connotes a whole tradition and implies a consequent acceptance of that tradition, thus placing limitations on the writer who would be reluctant to create anything that goes beyond it.

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Then again ‘book’ is perhaps as good a name as any, since books, historically, have always been more or less loosely bound. Take the Codex Sinaiticus, the oldest surviving Bible in the world, and the ancestor of all the Christian Bibles we have today. As it currently exists, it is incomplete. Nevertheless, it still includes all of the New Testament, half of the Old Testament, and two early Christian texts not featured in modern Bibles, all gathered into a single unit for the very first time. So it is the first Bible as we understand it. But it is also one of the first large books, as to gather together so many texts which had previously existed only as scrolled documents required a fundamental transformation in binding technology that eventually saw the scroll give way to the codex book.

Yet just as interesting is the fact that the Codex is also history's most altered biblical manuscript, containing approximately 30 corrections per page, roughly 23,000 in all. And these are not just minor corrections. For example, at the beginning of Mark's Gospel Jesus is *not* described as being the son of God. That was a revision added to the text later. In the original version, Jesus becomes divine only after he has been baptised by John the Baptist. Nor is Jesus resurrected in the Codex Sinaiticus. Mark's Gospel ends with the discovery of the empty tomb. The resurrection only takes place in competing versions of the story which are to be found in other manuscripts.

So the Bible -- often dubbed 'the Book of Books' -- cannot be read as that most fixed, standard, permanent and reliable of texts, the unaltered word of God. On the contrary, the text of the Bible was already seen as being fluid, evolving, emergent when the Codex was created in 350 AD.

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We could thus say that books have always been liquid and living to some extent: digital technology has simply helped to make us more aware of the fact.

Indeed, if I am interested in the domains of electronic books and publishing at all, it is because the defamiliarization effect produced by the change in material support from print-on-paper to digital offers us a chance to raise the kind of questions regarding our ideas of the book we should have been raising all along. As I was careful to stress in *Digitize This Book!* (2008), such questions were already present with regard to print and other media. However, as a result of modernity and the 'development and spread of the concept of the author, along with mass printing techniques, uniform multiple-copy editions, copyright, established publishing houses, editors' and so on, they have 'tended to be taken for granted, overlooked, marginalised, excluded or otherwise repressed'. Consequently, books have taken on the impression of being much more fixed, stable, reliable, authoritative, standardized and tightly bound than they actually are, or have ever been. For even if a book is produced in a multiple copy print edition, each copy *is* different, having its own singular life, history, old-age and death -- which is why we can form affective and symbolic attachments to them.

This is not to say that *we have never been modern*, that books have never been tightly fastened or bound; but rather that *this force of binding is just what modernity, and the book, is… or was, perhaps.*