

**Re-viewing Peer Reviewing: Towards an Affirmative Scholarship****Tamara Shefer**

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**ABSTRACT**

Although often unacknowledged and unrewarded, peer reviewing is a crucial part of the process of academic scholarship. Surprisingly, not much has been written on the process and experience of peer reviewing, besides a few articles in journals of teaching and learning in higher education. Nor has there been much consideration of peer reviewing as a critical component of the academic project within larger efforts to rethink the problematic euro-western, patriarchal and neoliberal logics that underpin higher education. This article makes a contribution to the emerging interest in the peer reviewing process by considering the experiences of authors in this regard and thinking about reviewing as a pedagogical practice which refuses reviewing as an individualist, competitive and gate-keeping practice. We address reviewing as a key component of the project of reconceptualising knowledge-making practices, within the context of current feminist decolonial and new materialist rethinkings of dominant neoliberal scholarship. We propose affirmative, response-able peer reviewing as a critical part of the larger project of challenging current conditions and practices in higher education - for doing academia differently.

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## Introduction

Peer review forms a critical part of the process of academic scholarship that, according to some estimates, produces more than 3 million peer-reviewed research articles and annually invests \$2 trillion US dollars (USD) globally, none of which is invested in payment to review (Tennant & Ross-Hellauer, 2020). In this respect peer-reviewing is flagged as key to the current neoliberal university which insists on individualist, competitive ‘output’, ‘publish or perish’, in a ‘post-academic’ university (Donskis, 2019). Notwithstanding, the system of peer reviewing, as an institutional norm governing academic scholarship, plays a central role to quality, credibility and integrity in academia (Horbach & Halffman, 2018). Peer review has even been called “the linchpin of science” (Ziman, 1968: 148) to highlight the paramount role of peer review in ensuring that science is good, trustworthy and valuable (Cronin, 2005).

However, at the same time peer review has also been critiqued as a conservative, biased, and contentious practice that puts a heavy burden on (unpaid and unrecognized) reviewers (Biagioli, 2002; Horbach & Halffman, 2018; Smith, 2006). Richard Smith (1999: 4) famously wrote about anonymous peer review as “a court with an unidentified judge” that “makes us think immediately of totalitarian states and the world of Franz Kafka”. Most academics who have published a scholarly article or book have horror stories to tell about brutal peer reviews that cause anguish and devastate the author rather than encouraging new ideas or engaging with authors in a constructive spirit. As Jackson, Peters, Benade, Devine, Arndt, Forster, et al (2018: 96) write, “social and academic media feature a steady parade of articles, blogs, cartoons and memes, telling apocryphal tales of the horrors of peer review” (see also Hyland & Jiang, 2020). Such a normative praxis is particularly challenging for early career scholars and those historically marginal or more junior in scholarship as they engage in this territorial battle in already “occupied territory”, forced to venture (and vulnerable to attack) by the current logics of the university (Kamler & Thomson, 2006: 29).

A groundswell of feminist, decolonial and other critical scholars have, over the last few decades and increasingly, argued the imperative to “review epistemic habits, which often are implicitly given rather than explicitly discussed” (Lykke, 2017: 2). Peer reviewing is one such epistemic habit that arguably exerts epistemic violence which needs to be interrogated. Peer reviewing as an academic practice is deeply embedded in Eurocentric normative practices of knowledge production, which assume an authoritative expert and rely on critique within a framework of individualistic competition (Jackson et al., 2018; Wellmon & Piper, 2017). Such practices are exacerbated by the corporatisation of

universities resulting from the contemporary neoliberal conditions under which higher education operates (Forsberg, Geschwind, Levander & Wermke, 2022). These conditions have led to increasing competitiveness in academic scholarship which puts pressure on academics to publish quickly and prolifically, with emphasis on quantity rather than quality. The imperative of publishing, pivoting around brutal individualized reviewing of the other, is recalcifying in the neoliberal imperatives that drive individual, university and nation-state scholarship.

In this context, academics are under considerable pressure to publish in what are considered to be high status 'gold standard' peer-reviewed books or journals, and their academic careers are built on the number of citations and publications they have managed to accumulate in such journals. Indeed, it was noted some time ago by critical scholars that there has been a "return to a Western elitist high modernism that would reinscribe a narrow form of experimentalism as the 'gold standard' for judging legitimacy and quality" (Canella & Lincoln, 2004, p. 165). This methodological conservatism, coupled with 'publish or perish' imperatives, puts extreme pressure on scholars not only to publish rapidly, but also to publish in particular journals and particular kinds of research. This also means that they are dependent on peer reviewing of their work in order to gain access to publishing their work. This necessitates not only submitting their work for scrutiny to their peers but being obligated to continuously subject themselves to blind (and often, as mentioned, brutal) peer-review processes.

This article considers how peer reviewing as an academic practice might be reconfigured as a creative, generative and ethical process through thinking-with decolonial, feminist new materialist and posthuman philosophies and theorists. It joins other recent efforts by scholars in various disciplines (e.g. see Jackson et al. 2018; Peters, Brighouse, Tesar, Sturm & Jackson, 2020; Ross-Hellauer, 2017; Tennant & Ross-Hellauer, 2020) to reconceptualize peer review and address the limitations of current practices of peer review. Located in a dialogue with our own experiences of being reviewed and reviewing over many years, in particular the damaging and violent practices we have witnessed and experienced, and on the basis of our thinking within alternative onto-ethico-epistemologies, we make propositions about forms of reviewing-with rather than reviewing-against. We use the term reviewing-with as an alternative proposition for forms of reviewing that contest the current combative, individualist and undermining reviewing traditions that are endemic to the dominating logics of the colonial, patriarchal and neoliberal capitalist academy. Reviewing-with is underpinned instead by a relational ontology, immanent critique, diffractive reading, care-full, dialogical and collaborative engagement, what we see as response-able peer reviewing, with another piece of writing towards a stronger scholarly contribution. We use the term care-full to speak of both a caring

practice for the author and their work, but also as a vigilant practice which is located within an alternative ethical, ontological and epistemological project. We use the term response-able to denote both a responsive stance and an enabling response on the part of the author. Response-able peer reviewing speaks to a larger proposition for reconceptualising just scholarship within a relational ontology. Generally speaking, response-ability refers to the ability or capacity to respond or a responsiveness to what matters to the author and the reviewer. These alternative practices and their underlying ethico-onto-epistemology are elaborated in further detail in the paper.

Our article aims to think of ways of reconfiguring peer reviewing processes, by moving away from the mode of (destructive) critique, which still stands at the centre of peer review, opting instead for more affirmative, generous, imaginative, care-full and inventive responses involving curiosity, attentiveness and attunement, crafting new ways of doing, thinking and living in academia – what we call response-able peer reviewing. This is an alternative to the usual method of anonymous peer-reviewing of manuscripts which is located in a tradition of critique and contestation and reflects colonialist, patriarchal and humanist, individualistic hegemonies in the academy. We share some examples from our experiences and experimentations with alternative ways of reviewing that are capacious, generative, generous and care-full. Such a methodology could form a dual function – that of doing justice to the text of the writer, whilst at the same time making it possible for the work of reviewing to be acknowledged and to be recognized as a scholarly piece, which of course it is. Arguably such a reviewing practice would also result in a stronger and more valuable contribution to scholarship.

### **The development of peer review: Past, present and future**

Even though peer review has been a familiar practice in academic scholarship for some time now, research on this subject is surprisingly thin, often producing conflicting or inconclusive results (Forsberg et al., 2022; Tennant & Ross-Hellauer, 2020). This is why Tennant and Ross-Hellauer have recently suggested that there is a need for rigorous and coordinated research focused on a new multidisciplinary field of Peer Review Studies. But what is the origin of the peer review process, what are its main dysfunctions, and what are some recent developments that have impacted the process of reviewing?

Many accounts locate the origins of peer review in the seventeenth century, coinciding with Henry Oldenburg's establishment of the journal *Philosophical Transactions* (Horbach & Halfman, 2018; Jackson et al., 2018). Other accounts suggest that the concept of peer review is considerably older and

predates the production of scholarly journals (Peters, Besley, Jandrić & Bajić, 2016). However, historians of science argue that many journals did not introduce peer review in the sense of peers judging the quality and publishability of a manuscript until after the Second World War (Horbach & Halffman, 2018). In fact, the term ‘peer review’, according to Horbach and Halffman, only emerged in the scientific press (first in medical journals) in the 1960s.

The practice of assessing or commenting on manuscripts prior to publication arose in learned societies in the early and mid-nineteenth century and was intended to act as a gatekeeping mechanism (Horbach & Halffman, 2018). However, in their early forms, reviews were performed by other society members – a process that encouraged cronyism, connections and academic patronage (Wellmon & Piper, 2017). We could argue that while more nuanced in contemporary academia, such problematic practices remain a part of reviewing traditions. Only in the late nineteenth century were peer-review practices established as an antidote to such problematic practices; the referee was perceived to have a duty to ensure the state of ‘good science’ (Horbach & Halffman, 2018). Despite some early concerns, explain Horbach and Halffman, the system remained in use and was slowly adopted by independent journals outside academic societies.

Peer review is generally understood today as “the principle through which science regulates itself through a series of rational judgments and decisions. In this incarnation, peer review is deployed as a powerful discursive tool for the legitimation of science and expertise” (Biagioli, 2002: 35). Although there have been some interesting transformations in the traditional peer review (that vary by discipline) – particularly in the aftermath of digital transformations that have impacted the mechanisms of peer review – the system of peer review as a sort of ‘filter’ that distinguishes ‘good’ from ‘bad’ scholarship remains essentially the same in principle and practice. Needless to say, this system entails power over scholars; although some scholars may be uncomfortable with these power relations, especially emerging from anonymity, there may be others who enjoy the anonymity afforded to compete and feel power over others, especially considering the neoliberal academy.

What has changed dramatically in recent years is the commodification of science and research that has transformed traditional academic publishers into global corporations that make huge profits taking advantage of the labour of academics for free, while increasingly pitting academics against each other. Darnton describes this rather poignantly: “We faculty do the research, write the papers, referee papers by other researchers, serve on editorial boards, all of it for free...and then we buy back the results of our labour at outrageous prices” (Barok, Berry, Balázs, Dockray, Goldsmith, Iles, et al, 2015,

n.p). In the debates on peer review, various critiques have been raised about the dysfunctions of traditional peer review that have led to some innovations and modifications in recent years. The problems as well as some of the modifications that have been made about peer review are briefly discussed below.

Ross-Hellauer (2017) mentions the following criticisms of traditional peer review:

- Unreliability and inconsistency: There is no consistency in decisions to reject or accept a paper and reviewers rarely agree with one another, so the system is unreliable.
- Delay and expense: The traditional peer review process can delay publication of an article for a year or more. This delay slows down the availability of results for further research and professional exploitation; this delay is costly for those dependent on this process for grant money, promotion or professional recognition.
- Lack of accountability and risks of subversion: Because of anonymity, reviewers can be biased, have conflicts of interest, or purposely give a bad review to block or delay publication of competitors' ideas or even steal their ideas.
- Social and publication biases: Reviewers have biases based on gender, nationality, language or other characteristics of the author(s). They can also be biased against a particular discipline or less mainstream or new methods of research.
- Lack of incentives: For the most part, as raised earlier, reviewers do their work for free and their contributions cannot be recognised and hence rewarded.
- Wastefulness: Although discussions between editors and reviewers or between reviewers and authors include valuable information for younger researchers, this information is wasted as it is never passed on.

As a response to some of these criticisms, many journals now support open peer review (which gained momentum in the late 1990s) in which: (i) the identities of authors and reviewers are known; (ii) review reports are published alongside the relevant article rather than being kept confidential; and (iii) the wider community (and not just invited reviewers) are able to contribute to the review process (Peters et al., 2020). As such, open peer review argues Sturm, fits with the concept of collective writing as 'composition' that opens up possibilities for co-writing and co-reviewing as a process of multiplying, transforming, and redistributing the relations of authors, editors and reviewers (in Peters et al., 2020). However, as Ross-Hellauer and Görögh (2019) remind us:

Open peer review (OPR) is moving into the mainstream, but it is often poorly understood, and surveys of researcher attitudes show important barriers to implementation. As more journals move to implement and experiment with the myriad

of innovations covered by this term, there is a clear need for best practice guidelines to guide implementation.

According to Ross-Hellauer and Görögh, open peer review addresses various concerns of traditional peer review such as accountability, transparency, bias, inconsistency, time, incentive and wasted effort, but more work is needed to understand its strengths and limitations (see also Tennant & Ross-Hellauer, 2020). Nor has it become a more mainstream practice.

From the 1990s onwards, various technological advances paved the way for new developments in the peer review system such as post-publication peer review and preprint servers; publishing more articles, while allowing a shift of review criteria from importance to rigour; the advent of automated checks and similar software tools; further specialisation of peer review; and more communication during the review process (Horbach & Halffman, 2018). These developments indicate the remarkable diversity in contemporary models of peer review that have changed along four dimensions, according to Horbach and Halffmann (2018: 12): (i) the selection conditions, including the timing of the review and its selectiveness; (ii) the identity of and interaction between the actors involved; (iii) the levels of specialisation within the review process; and (iv) the extent to which technological assistance has been implemented in the review system. These four dimensions cover an array of concerns that can map both the historic and current forms of peer review.

In this paper, we want to particularly focus on a dimension that has not received much attention, namely, the pedagogical and justice dimension of peer reviewing (Jackson in Peters et al., 2020), especially in relation to the language of peer reviews and how authors find discouraging or hurtful criticisms about their work (Hyland & Jiang, 2020). As Jackson (in Peters et al., 2020: 5-6) explains, open peer review practices can exemplify the values of a form of pedagogy:

As a form of pedagogy, peer-reviewing can be educational and instructive to both reviewers and authors. First, open peer review reveals and underscores the way in which reviewers and authors are both ideally contributing to knowledge production through their relational and dialogical actions by shaping an article. Open peer review as a publication practice further illuminates how research is essentially an act of opening a topic and field to new extended conversation, while the practices of review at the same time play a crucial role in assessing quality of information and claims.

We agree that the notion of peer reviewing as a pedagogical practice can serve as the basis for future ways of reconsidering the quality, effectiveness, or feasibility of diverse peer review forms. This is the dimension we want to further develop in this paper in our efforts to practice peer reviewing

differently. Reviewing differently is a crucial way of addressing reviewers' often destructive reports that can be demoralizing and demotivating, especially to young scholars, as Kwan points out:

Many first-time writers are confused, discouraged or even shocked by the negative reviews they receive, and the substantial revisions requested...Some never attempt to revise and resubmit their work that reviewers see as having potential for publication.  
(Kwan, 2013: 213)

In the next section of the paper, we focus on how reviewing might be a more affirmative practice for all parties, through response-able reviewing.

### Response-able reviewing as an affirmative practice

Elsewhere, Bozalek and Zembylas (2017, p. 63-64) have elaborated on the roots and meanings of response-ability as follows:

The notion of response-ability is one which has been written about by feminist new materialist scholars such as Karen Barad (2007), Donna Haraway (1992, 1997, 2016) and Vinciane Despret (2004, 2016). Generally speaking, response-ability refers to the ability or capacity to respond. This term has also been referred to by these authors in the following ways: "differential responsiveness (as performatively articulated and accountable) to what matters" (Barad 2007, 380), "cultivating collective knowing and doing" (Haraway 2016, 34) or "sympoiesis (making-with)" (Haraway 2016, 58), and "rendering each other capable" (Despret 2004, 2016)... Importantly, the ability to respond is not only seen as human but also as a relational capacity by which humans and more than humans are co-constituted through their relationships with each other. A relational ontology, on which response-ability is based, holds that entities or individuals do not pre-exist their relationships—they come into being and are rendered capable through multidirectional relationships.

How can we engage in response-able ways of peer reviewing - those which maximise the author's ability to respond to the comments made by the peer reviewer? What's wrong with (destructive) critique? Much peer reviewing that is undertaken happens through moralising, masculinist, authoritative practices of destructive critique, which have to do with mastery and judgement (Boulous Walker, 2016). Posthuman writers such as Brian Massumi, Erin Manning and Karen Barad have revolutionised scholarship and research by moving away from conventional academic critique, opting instead for more modest, generous, imaginative and inventive responses involving curiosity and attentiveness or attunement, crafting new ways of doing, thinking and living in academia. They reject the sort of destructive critique which judges and mediates from a distance, pinning down texts, othering them or dismissing them out of hand, and in so doing often caricaturing the author and doing epistemological damage; often also more subjective damage to the individual author. Massumi (2015) even goes so far as to call this a sadistic practice. The author's response to such critiques might be a



defensive one, which may have the effect of merely leaving ideas in place rather than changing them, in that the harsh judgement of the reviewer at a distance may seem a step too far to engaging with and altering the text. Karen Barad, in an interview with Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin, views such modes of critique as “over-rated, over-emphasized, and over-utilized” (2012: 49). If (destructive) critique is not a useful tool for the reviewing process, what might alternatives look like? In thinking about response-able reviewing as an affirmative practice, we now consider various alternative approaches to reviewing – immanent critique, diffractive reading and reviewing as a collaborative practice.

### *Beyond critique – immanent critique*

Brian Massumi (2015) and Erin Manning (2016) propose the concept of immanent critique, which emanates from a deep in-dwelling with the subject matter with which the manuscript is dealing, in an effort to understand “the conditions of its existence from within” (Manning, 2016: 12). Critique then should only be practiced from being within the thick of things, apprehending the “thisness” of the text. Immanent critique should activate the potential of the “what else”, the “more-than” or the “not-yet thought” of the text (Manning, 2020). This in-depth engagement of staying-with the text and doing justice to it can only happen if authors can work and think within a relational ontology which acknowledges how knowledge is always co-constructed and that refuses the individualist neoliberal and human exceptional mode of self and self-promotion. This kind of engagement can also only be possible if processes like reviewing are given some recognition – both in terms of workload of academics, and recognition in terms of acknowledgements and resources – academics need to benefit from the work they do, not just the publishers and the universities, as has been discussed in the section above. It must be acknowledged that reviewing is a long and complicated process, sometimes taking up hours of precious time in academia, which could have been used for self or co-writing projects. Barad (2014) proposes a diffractive affirmative reading to replace critique.

### *Diffractive reading for peer-reviewing*

A diffractive reading is an affirmative engagement with a text – where attention is paid to the fine-grain details of the text in order to do justice to what the author is trying to portray. Diffraction is also an iterative process – meaning that it is not a once-off engagement but involves both the reviewer and the author re-turning (turning the text over and inside out rather than revisiting it (Barad, 2014)). Why a diffractive reading is so fruitful for the process of reviewing is that it does not hold one set of

ideas as pre-existing and compare them to another pre-existing set of ideas, but rather looks for new insights which flash up through their always already existing entanglements with each other in their intra-action. Thus, the notion of diffraction unsettles taken-for-granted assumptions about the independent prior existence of entities outside of practices or relationships (this is more akin to the notion of interaction). In a diffractive process, subjects and objects as well as texts materialize through intra-action, not prior to relationships, as is assumed in a Cartesian epistemology.

Diffraction involves a special kind of reading of insights through one another, paying attention to the specificities of a text, the patterns of resonances and dissonances. This attunement with textual intra-actions provides the potential for inventive provocations which make it possible to move the text into not-yet thought of realms. A diffractive reviewing process pays particular attention to the differences that knowledge practices make in the world and how they matter (Barad, 2007: 72). Diffractive reviewing also involves a troubling of disciplinary and other binaries – nature/culture, fact/value, science/arts, and in this way opens the reviewing practice to more expansive imaginaries. A diffractive reviewing is one which is open, thoughtful, care-full, gets in touch with what the author/s is/are trying to convey, and responds to the text in ways which are good to think-with and that can take it further. If the reviewing process is not in touch with what the author is trying to put across, or if the reviewer is just using the process to show his or her knowledge or to put forward his or her own pet theories or ideas, the review is not orientated toward enabling a response-ability (an ability to respond) or making it possible for the author to take their ideas further, losing the thread of how to enliven the text in ways not yet thought of.

A diffractive reviewing process does not separate politics, ethics, ontology and epistemology. Reviewing is therefore an ethical process involving various sensibilities which are flagged in immanent critique and diffractive reading including curiosity, wonder, attentiveness, attunement, liveliness. These sensibilities assist reviewing to be a particular articulated practice of embodied engagement, and where there is an appreciation that one is both affected by and affects the text (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010).

#### *Reviewing as a collaborative process*

Anonymous reviewing assumes that we can be external and removed from that which we are scrutinising – this is contrary to a posthuman or feminist new materialist belief that we are always already part of the world and we cannot extricate ourselves from the world. Anonymous reviewing

therefore lends itself to non-collaborative, combative forms of engagement. On the other hand, thinking-with, alongside, across, in an ongoing way is generative for reviewing and, at the same time, it opens up more ethical and collaborative ways of reviewing which also make for 'better' scholarship. Elsewhere we have argued the importance of challenging the anonymous blind reviewer tradition as an important part of reconceptualizing the review process within a response-able, ethical praxis of scholarship (see Bozalek, Zembylas & Shefer, 2019). We have argued that:

Anonymised peer reviewing further distances the reader from the author, allowing for possible 'epistemological damage' a notion used by Barad to describe the harm that is done by critique which essentialises, objectifies and often moralises when a phenomenon is being investigated as she puts it "Not picking up a work and dismissing it or slamming before its given its due, before it is even understood" (Juelskjær & Schwennesen, 2012). Such practices of exteriority and superiority of the reviewer as outside expert, knowing better and feeling entitled to scrutinise and interrogate the work of another from a distance, assume that these insights are not available to the writer him or herself.

(Bozalek, Zembylas & Shefer, 2019: 351)

For reviewing to be enacted in a response-able manner, it should be done in a care-full polite way that issues an invitation, welcoming a response from the author. Reviewing is useful if it is an iterative process – where a dialogue is created between writer and reader of text and where the text is further honed.

It is also possible to present the author with a range of possible responses to the text as in a collective reviewing process, and for the author to be able to select what responses make better sense to them. One of the authors of this article had a PhD student who put his thesis on google docs and received 100 different responses to his text – he chose which he found most useful and used them to review the text for himself. Perhaps it would also be useful if the author indicated in the reviewing process what the aspects are they were most interested in receiving feedback on. If we regard reviewing as a collaborative making and remaking of texts, and about experimenting with different interventions and enactments, then the process of reviewing can be regarded as generative and a learning for all parties. In this way, reviewing is deployed as a pedagogical practice in which both a stronger text is facilitated and both reviewer and author gain new knowledges. The ideas which are troubled in the text should be a genuine interrogation of one's own ideas too, renewing the text through a reading and re-reading of the author's ideas through one's own ideas, other ideas, etc.

Perhaps the most inspiring description of how a response-able reviewing process might work is Nietzsche's description of a reading 'with doors left open, with delicate eyes and fingers' (Nietzsche, 1976, cited in Boulous Walker, 2016: 24). In the encounter with writing and thinking we need to keep

ourselves open to how we are being changed by the text or the conversation. This would require a deep attentive listening to what the writing or thinking is trying to do, perhaps taking it beyond where both author and reader thought it could go. This collective form of engagement, a thinking-alongside, provides ongoing different encounters with the same texts or ideas, and might provide spaces where all parties are willing to take risks so that seeds of change may take the text into new and interesting paths. Immanent critique, and by extension, diffractive reading as response-able affirmative reviewing practices, are active participatory processes (Massumi, 2015).

To summarise then, affirmative response-able practices of reviewing such as immanent critique, diffractive reading and collaborative reviewing, are those which involve generous giving, and taking further (the 'more-than') what the author is attempting to grapple with. The consequence of such reviewing would be to help craft new ways of thinking about the subject matter, sparking the imagination and inventiveness of the author rather than shutting this down, which may happen if the author feels defensive about what the reviewer has said.

### Practices of reviewing

All of us who are currently inducted into the 'publish or perish' imperative of the neoliberal university have experienced the harsh and punitive eye of the combative anonymous reviewer. In this section, we engage with some examples of such reviews that we have personally received to illustrate and unpack in more depth the way in which problematic, arguably deeply embedded colonial and patriarchal logics, underpin many mainstream reviewing practices. We further unpack how a critical interrogation of such practices speaks to possibilities of alternative practices, including the micro level of discursive engagement in a particular review but also more radical macro level changes that need to happen.

When one of the authors of this article received the review below, they were already a relatively hardened academic, with a 'tough skin' in relation to reviewing so did not suffer as much as an earlier career scholar might. Yet it still felt humiliating and made her feel as if she should throw the article in the waste basket, indeed a frequent practice reported by many participants in writing workshops when asked about early experiences with reviewing. The reviewers wrote that:

The main argument of the paper is weak and this is the main limitation of the paper. The paper is largely a description of 'narratives of transactional sex' at a university campus and does not add much new to what is already known about the phenomenon. Much has been written on transactional sex in Africa, and although the authors allude to some of the debates that have been raised on the phenomenon, especially concerning

women's vulnerability and coercion, they do not critically engage with these debates. As a result, the paper is still too descriptive.

In this example, while not questioning the reviewer's possibly legitimate concerns about the article, we can see how clearly the reviewer is operating from a place of external authority, with a particular Cartesian academic logic in mind, to launch a harsh and damning critique. Rather than thinking-with the author towards strengthening and contributing to the writing, the reviewer launches an attack through locating themselves in a position of knowledge themselves, that is engaging self-promotion – 'much has been written about ...'. In a sweeping move, the paper is judged to be deficit in relation to the set of expectations – 'critical engagement' and not 'descriptive'. While there is no doubt the paper may have been lacking in rigour, and could have been strengthened, the reviewer is not engaging in an enabling manner but rather setting up a sense of irredeemable deficit and lack on the part of the authors, while displaying their own self-promotionary intentions.

As another example of the practice of reviewing as one that is driven by individualist, territorial and combative logics, one frequently has the sense that reviewers judge an article on the basis of whether their own work has been acknowledged (or not). Very often one can get a good sense of the reviewer identity through their recommendations for further literature, that is, their own publications!

It is not uncommon for reviewers to present their reviews in a performative way, a kind of drama with emotive innuendos as in the following example:

I find it disconcerting that the FGDs [focus group discussions] seem to recount other people's experiences to the degree they do, not 'own experiences'. It is all about 'they' and 'them'. The data appears to be second-hand rather than original narratives of own experience. I really wonder about the value of FGD research in this kind of study. I have yet to see it yield much of interest. ...I regret to say that I don't feel this study makes any new headway in understanding the challenges of reducing new infections in student populations. It needs much more work and I am concerned that the quality of data available may not sustain a deeper analysis. It seems that the authors brought too many assumptions to the table, they did not get deep conversations going, and the respondents spoke in terms of the categories presented to them for discussion. ...There are many ways in which one might research this, and in my view focus group discussions will have relatively little place, besides perhaps exploring the viability of recommendations that may arise. *HIV behaviour researchers must step out of the box.* ... (our emphasis)

It is also evident that reviews are frequently a showcasing of the reviewer's personal academic irritations – 'HIV behaviour researchers must step out of the box' – often revealing their own epistemological, ontological and methodological location, with little reflexivity of how this is shaping their responses and possibilities for alternative ways of doing research. This reviewer clearly devalues

focus group discussions and seems to be more located within a quantitative methodology, sceptical of the value of qualitative material and buying into empiricist notions of truth – ‘the authors brought too many assumptions to the table’ – and fails to recognize the strategic value of ‘distancing’ tactics when researching areas that participants might find difficult to speak about with respect to themselves and maybe using the third person as a rhetorical device.

Contrary to these examples is the following which, while offering a critical reading, appears to be directed at thinking-with our article and asking questions, inviting us to think, with them, further and deeper towards richer scholarship:

Oceanic thinking: the authors introduce (but do not really develop) the idea of wildness in relation to oceans, but they do not engage conceptually with the specifics of the oceanic: tides, waves, salt, currents, etc. Nor do they engage materially with these ideas, which is particularly surprising given their stated interest in swimming and in “embodied, affective methodologies in or near the oceans/s”: how do human (and non-human!) bodies encounter oceans, how are we shaped by oceans, what does it mean to swim in an ocean? And how is this different, not just conceptually, but also materially, from swimming in freshwater (rivers, ponds, lakes)? What does it really mean to “think with” – and through and in – oceans, not just conceptually, but with our bodies?

While there is a clear indication of a gap in the paper and possibilities for further developing the arguments, it is not presented in a way that is irreparable. Rather the reviewer asks salient questions that open up opportunities to think more and think differently. Questions like this, as mentioned earlier, stretch the thinking, rather than shut it down. We are invited to think more, in ways that are important for our stated project in the article. The reviewer’s citing of the authors’ text gestures to a close and care-full reading and a visceral sense that the reviewer is not reading as outsider, but is response-able, thinking with us, with positive and affirmative impact on the affective and intellectual experience of the authors.

In thinking of reviewing differently, it is not only incumbent on the reviewer but also the author/s to reconceptualise the practice of reviewing as a dialogical and collaborative one, constituting a pedagogical practice for all those involved in thinking together. The example below which includes the authors’ responses to the reviewers is illustrative of the way in which reviewing may serve as a ‘becoming with’ (Haraway, 2008) pedagogical and scholarly praxis for all engaged in a collaborative reading-writing praxis:

<p>Although I am not familiar with the methodology that has been used, my assessment is that the study does not meet the criteria for rigour in qualitative research.</p>	<p>Diffraction is part of a post-qualitative inquiry which has an entirely different notion of research and what is required for this research approach. We have cited St. Pierre to alert the reader to the differences between qualitative research and post-qualitative inquiry. A qualitative research study focuses on collecting and analysing data but a post qualitative inquiry uses philosophical concepts and experimentation to create something new – as St Pierre (2021, p.6) puts it “The goal of post qualitative inquiry is not to systematically repeat a pre-existing research process to produce a recognizable result but to experiment and create something new and different that might not be recognizable in existing structures of intelligibility.”</p>
<p>The study does not substantiate the broad claims and conclusions it draws.</p>	<p>We appreciate, and agree with, this comment. In response, we have expanded the conclusion of the section above, “Montage ...” (pp. 4-5) and the introduction to the following section, “Propositions...” to provide clearer conceptual links between the two sections (see pp.12-13).</p>

Here we see the authors responding to the relatively modest comment (a reviewer who at least admits ignorance) through an informative, pedagogical dialogue, assisting them to extend their own knowledge. This engagement in turn allows the authors to more clearly locate their work so that readers are better informed of their methodological approach in the article, thus strengthening the publication. In responding also to a relatively damning sweeping comment that that the article ‘does not substantiate the broad claims and conclusions it draws’, the authors refuse to be deflated and defensive, and rather engage in the most response-able manner, for themselves and the article’s future by seeking spaces to better substantiate claims and conclusions.

In sum, these few examples illustrate some aspects of the problematic praxis of normative modes and habits of reviewing that we have elaborated in depth above, such as the ‘blind’ individualized review in which a reviewer is called upon to assert their own scholarly prowess through the reviewing performance – a masculinist and colonial epistemic habit. They also, however, as we have attempted to surface, gesture to the productive possibilities of alternative forms of reviewing. These go beyond a liberal-humanist injunction to be a ‘constructive’ reviewer who starts with a positive affirmation before the violent attack, to a more radical rethinking of the practice of reviewing which questions the very terms of academic critique and review and its embeddedness in colonial, patriarchal and human-centred endeavours of power and regulation that the academy has so long been implicated in. These toxic examples open up a way of thinking about alternative reviews that are located in a different set of logics, that refuse the distance of the ‘objective’ authoritative ‘expert’, separate from other’s knowledges. Our earlier critiques of dominant reviewing traditions as viewed through these examples speak to an alternative ethical, ontological and epistemological position for reviewing – one which

seeks to work relationally and collaboratively and acknowledges the already dialogical and diffractive nature of immanent critique. Arguably, these diffractive practices of reviewing will also contribute towards stronger scholarship, rather than stronger individual profiles. Collaborative and public forms of reviewing such as the example cited earlier are particularly helpful practices in this respect. Published or public reviews as a form of knowledge production that is acknowledged, valued and rewarded are further creative and constructive ways of reconceptualizing both the praxis and 'output' of reviewing.

## Conclusion

Response-able reviewing is a critical part of the larger project of challenging current conditions and practices in higher education. We have argued and attempted to illustrate here how doing academic reviewing differently involves a radical rethinking of the review process and a consideration of alternative ways of understanding and conducting reviewing, while also paying greater attention to the material-discursive practice of conducting reviews. Interrogating and arguing for alternatives to the 'blind', 'objective' disengaged review conducted from a distance, is one key provocation that we make in our arguments for alternative forms of reviewing and that will destabilize the kinds of individualizing, competitive praxis we have illustrated in these examples. Such forms of reviewing will challenge both the normative form of 'othering' and often violent reviews which are embedded in colonial, patriarchal and humanist logics. They also address the lack of acknowledgement of reviewing and reviewers in normative scholarship. We have argued in particular for diffractive reading, for immanent critique and collaborative reviewing as part of a response-able and affirmative reviewing process. We have proposed that reviews underpinned with this alternative ethico-onto-epistemological approach could be viewed as a conversation towards strengthening the writing, rather than an opportunity to further the academic ego of the author. In this way, as Bozalek et al. (2019:352-353,) argue:

the text could, then, be viewed as an actor instead of a product, especially since the eventual reader of the text will be quite literally thinking-with the material text. What if the text is viewed as the ultimate non-human other that is always in the process of becoming given the unknown and unexpected readers who will take it up? For example, we are indebted to the reviewers who intra-acted materially with our chapter and pushed us to raise this question.

Here we have also argued the value of reviewing as a pedagogical practice in which both the author and reader rethink their ascribed and fixed roles, and engage in thinking-with, rather than thinking-against, towards a stronger contribution for a justice-to-come, indicating that it is an ongoing process



which is never finished (Barad, 2017). In this respect, we argue the importance of moving beyond the dualism of the author-reviewer to appreciate the importance of collaborative forums for mentorship-based reviewing between peers as well as across different experiences and expertise, so that reviewing is engaged through a collective scholarly practice underpinned by a relational ontology and ethics of care.

As we have argued, a key component of such alternative forms of reviewing requires also a radical revisioning of reviewing as a scholarly praxis, which requires alternative forms of acknowledgement. Although academic publishing is standardized worldwide, local university requirements and expectations for publishing affect different scholars differently and, therefore, there is a lot to learn from one another on how to acknowledge more effectively the contributions of all involved actors. Paying care-full attention to how we review the contributions of others is but one occasion in the greater challenge of re-imagining socially just pedagogical and scholarly practices.

In sum, we have argued here for immanent, diffractive, collaborative practices as part of response-able peer-reviewing. We used these affirmative approaches to think-alongside destructive modes of reviewing, such as those we have shared from our own experiences, to begin to imagine what this might look like. Notably, many are already experimenting with such alternatives, and we need to think more carefully about what needs to be done in academia to open spaces for the practices that we suggest. Importantly, we need to begin working with these proposed alternative logics and practices of reviewing at material, institutional and discursive levels. Engaging with our postgraduate students or even earlier in our pedagogical and mentoring practices with early career scholars to explore and promote such practices is important, as is more exploration and advocacy within the journals we write for and edit.

Finally, it is important to reassert that alternative practices of reviewing both rely on larger changes in the conditions of the university but will also inspire new ways of being and doing in our everyday engagements in research and pedagogical practice. Collaborative, immanent and diffractive reviewing practices make for not only more just and response-able reviewing but arguably for better scholarship achieved through immersion and dialogical scholarship. It also both relies on and gestures to the critical decolonial, feminist new materialist project of a radical reconfiguring of the ethico-onto-epistemological project of scholarship. We cannot however help but note that the suggestions we make here may be taken up as another orthodoxy in the academy – and wonder if we are not slipping into the very Cartesian thinking we challenge. In this respect we hope our thoughts are not taken up

as a binary proposition that all critique is violent and ‘bad’ and that we subscribe to only affirmative, kind, gentle approaches. Indeed, we have cautioned earlier that doing reviewing differently is not simply about the knee-jerk advice provided on how to give feedback in neoliberal humanist framings, such as the well-known advice to first provide affirmation before critique and then affirmation again (known as the sandwich technique of feedback). Rather we are asking for a radically different way of thinking about/thinking-with a scholarly article when reviewing it, that refuses the dominant logics and practices of reviewing we are taught. Beyond reviewing itself, this requires a radical refusal of the ruling logics of the academy itself at a larger level, and a recognition that we are always already part of the world and cannot extricate ourselves from it.

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