



About vicarious blame, containers, and contents: Rejoinder to le Grange

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Abstract

In this article, I reflect on le Grange's (2019) response to my article (Maistry, 2019) on predatory publishing. I engage with his critique on various levels. While I agree with the notion of embracing positive action, I analyse the usefulness of the dichotomisation of ethics and morality in understanding how this phenomenon should play itself out in academia. I contemplate the "container" versus "contents" debate, and its implications for the South African scholarship context. I also draw attention to the workings of two neoliberal markets at play in the academic publishing space: the neoliberal market for *publishing services*, and the market for *published* scholarship and offer some tentative implications for academics who have to inhabit this space. Finally, I argue that for debate to reach a high level of robustness, it has to start somewhere. For a phenomenon like predatory publishing, it might mean accommodating multiple perspectives, be they moralising, engaging an immanent ethics, even defensiveness. In fact, immanent critique urges the need to resist the temptation to "moralise" right or wrong approaches to debating this phenomenon. I reflect on how le Grange has extended the debate to include predation *for* publishing, an issue I argue is complexly connected to the historicity of containers (journals) serving as conduits for the propagation of racist ideology.

Keywords: predatory publishing, ethics, neoliberal publishing market

Introduction

A useful point of entry to this article is to briefly reflect on what I refer to as the ontological and epistemological disconnect between le Grange and myself. This is clearly evident in his reference to my narrative as *tale* (le Grange, 2019). Recounting one's personal story using self-study principles is certainly a valid and credible qualitative methodology that has gained significant traction (Lassonde, Galman, & Kosnick, 2009). I am well aware that, as with any methodological approach, self-study research also has its critics. The use of the concept tale, however, insinuates a fabrication of sorts, an embellishment of an occurrence for some sensational purpose. While le Grange may not have intended it this way, this unwitting choice of word has implicit effect. In this instance, it purports a subtext that connotes an element of

fictitious, imaginary recounting. It also reflects a somewhat dismissive othering. Lexical articulations are never neutral—they always betray the bona fides of the writer (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). Lorraine (2011) rightly reminded us that so-called legitimate modes of truth telling cannot accommodate “ambiguities of experience” (p. 131). As such, there is a need to be wary of gatekeepers who self-determine what counts as acceptable self-representation. “From a Deleuze-Guattarian perspective, the truth of . . . experience lies as much in its intensities and potential connections of those intensities to as yet unactualized modes of being as it does in what actually happened” (Lorraine, 2011, p. 131). It has been more than a year since scripting the “confessional” article (Maistry, 2019), a first step towards a renewal of my mode of being. That it was a traumatic time, and that I was in fact grieving for loss of sense of self-worth and reputation, is without question. While the period of grief is certainly not over, it is worthy of a tentative analysis by applying grief analysis theory given that this might well be what other affected colleagues are experiencing (le Grange included). I will consider the moral–ethical dilemma and how it might useful to engage a dialectic—as opposed to pursuing them as binaries. I conclude with a brief account of the markets at play in academic publishing and consumption and a critique of the container–contents debate.

About trauma and immanent ethics

I draw inspiration from Tasmin Lorraine’s (2011) reading of Deleuze and Guattari’s immanent ethics as a process “of affirming the active and joyous extension of our power for action in the assemblages of which we form component parts” (p. 115). She emphasised

the coming together of forces into a relatively stable configurations with particular capacities to affect and be affected . . . we are working parts of multiple assemblages at different levels . . . my capacities to affect and be affected relate to the relations I form with others. (Lorraine, 2011, p. 12)

Collective assemblages are akin to a Foucauldian (2001) discursive practice, “signifying and interpreting activities we engage in as we carry out our business; they entail enacted rule . . . of the social field” (Lorraine, 2011, p. 13). In my view, my association with the multiple assemblages to which I subscribe would have altered significantly. It thus warranted a form of action on my part—that it took on a confessional as opposed to a defensive tone is the result of my perceived academic capital at the time, a discussion of which follows later.

A useful point of departure, given its pertinence to the phenomenon under scrutiny, is to perhaps engage a brief Deleuzian account of trauma. In essence, trauma is an experience of dissonance at a personal (individual) level—a “disequilibrium in subjectivity experienced as painful” (Lorraine, 2011, p. 130), which she terms a *deterritorialization of the subject* that creates discomfort because it relates to one’s existence in a social space. Attending to trauma requires an attunement to “affects, intensities, and subtle nuances of meaning” (Lorraine, 2011, p. 130). The individual has to undergo a process of self-transformation—a process of locating points of intensification and seeking out relations or connections that might unblock one’s capacity to affect and be affected in an effort to seek relief from one’s traumatic state

(Lorraine, 2011). Giving vent to the trauma means more than simply articulating or denying, it requires the act of putting trauma in its place, a process of rendering trauma to a diminished status. Becoming worthy of the event in Deleuze and Guattarian terms requires an aesthetic rendering of the past and the harnessing of intensities towards a creative new (Lorraine, 2011). The (my) confessional, then, might be considered as first step in a rendering of the trauma, a first tentative line of flight. An ethics of becoming is thus a process of “transmuting sadness into joy, reactive forces into active ones, and a denying will into an affirming will in order to divest power from resisting what is and instead working with what is in ways that enhance one’s unfolding” (Lorraine, 2011, p. 133).

It was clear that le Grange found the confessional to be inappropriate and that assumption of full personal responsibility was, in his view, not helpful because it detracts from an analysis of the adverse, conspiring conditions that created the proverbial perfect storm. Note that when the perfect storm happens, it is the individual who has to, at that point in time, harness what resources are available and to take actions that might enable survival given the changed conditions. This socially constructed academic storm (the predatory publishing exposé) certainly triggered varied reaction. Mine was to assume full personal responsibility, given the multiple assemblages (disciplinary field, university departments, academic networks, non-governmental organisations, etc.) I am enmeshed in. Every assemblage has its own mechanisms that determine its parameters of participation in which multiple active agents interact. This discursive space is prone to significant discursive events that rupture and disorientate. The assemblage reviews and resets its parameters, developing interventions aimed at rescue from ensuing disequilibria. The review and reframing of the rubric for scholarship in South Africa can well be viewed as a kind of intervention. My decision to act can be viewed as invoking an immanent ethics—adopting a “realm of positive action” as le Grange (2019, p. 31) urged. Note, though, that le Grange’s (2019) reading of my intent as advocacy for nefarious investigations into the research profiles of academics is somewhat problematic. It is, without doubt, that South African academics holding a range of positions are affected by the exposé—both implicated colleagues and those who have to work with affected colleagues.

Note too, that Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) immanent ethics entails striving to resolve pragmatic problems (practical dilemmas) that we encounter. It posits a need for creative resolution as opposed to destructive action that le Grange (2019) rightly cautioned against. It would have been useful if le Grange had alluded to specifics of positive action that subjects in the assemblage might consider. Having said this, there is, however, a need on the part of affected subjects for a disposition of openness—a candidness about current realities as opposed to what currently parades, namely, that of a false congeniality in the assemblage.

More than a year has passed since scripting the lead paper (Maistry, 2019). It was a time of significant personal trauma. As such, it does have elements of hyperbolic narration, initial signs of my working through the stages of grief (Kubler-Ross & Kessler, 2005). Denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance are typical stages of grief people experience in random order (with movements between stages) as a powerful heuristic to make sense of

responses to personal trauma or loss. It is reasonable to assume that academics affected by the predatory publishing exposé might well be experiencing different stages of the grief that this discursive event has produced. Le Grange's revelation and his emphatic denouncement of what he described as "downright dangerous" (2019, p. 28) actions suggests that he is also working his way through the stages of grief. His appeal for a separation of morals from ethics, at face value seems reasonable. It, in fact, suffers from an assumption of a rationalism (a Cartesianism), namely, that the (traumatised) subject, in a state of delirium—an acutely disturbed state of mind (as in my case)—has the capacity to easily, and spontaneously distinguish between the personal (moral) and the public (ethical) fields. This realisation might well come through in the end. So, his invoking of Willinsky and Alperin's (2011) positive outlook (le Grange, 2019) is not incongruent with the positives that might accrue from moving between stages of grief. As stated earlier, these insights might well speak to the experiences of a number of South African academics who currently find themselves in similar positions.

Deleuze and Guatarri's immanent ethics (1987) is premised on the notion of, in the first instance, recognising and acknowledging what is, with a view to constructing anew. But, we can only get to commencing a process of renewal if the premise is clear—as le Grange (2019) suggested, if we tell the full story, if we play open cards. In pursuing this argument, it becomes much more than a simple matter of whether Beall (2013) or Mouton and Valentine's (2017) methodology and findings have rigor or not. It has to do with the dissonance that it *has* created for *all* academics who have to work together—for managers who have to make various kinds of decisions, and for institutions, as they contemplate dealing with the issue. That some prestigious scholars, deans, and executive managers of higher education institutions in South Africa might carry perceived "tainted" scholarship in their oeuvre is a South African reality. It begs the question, how to apply an immanent ethics—and the creative resolutions to be contemplated.

What is of concern is a paralysis that might come from being stuck for an extended period of time in a stage of denial and defensiveness. It is worth exploring this further. What might be the outcome of defensive positions? (le Grange might well argue that he was not being defensive). Defensiveness is an almost natural reaction when subjects are under attack, even if it is a perceived attack. For me, taking up a defensive disposition in dealing with this is highly unhelpful—it is degenerative as opposed to regenerative. In the first instance, it is an awareness (by me) of what is controllable (by me). Public perception, for example, is beyond my control. My perception of self and the scholarly work I currently do is my salvation. In a sense, it is more than simply reconnecting—it is about deciding what kinds of new connections to the assemblage I want to establish. The Freirean (1998) notion of a pedagogy of love has resonance here. In this instance, it is about invoking a pedagogy of self-love, a reterritorialisation (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) of the self. The process of reterritorialisation of the self though, depends on how resilient the self might be to the initial deterritorialisation. Le Grange's vast oeuvre of exceptional scholarship, his designation as distinguished professor, affords him significantly greater academic capital to confront, with authority, systemic fractures in the national and international scholarship enterprise. This may not be

the case for the case for the hundreds of academics affected by the predatory publishing exposé; especially those for whom tainted publication houses make up significant proportion of their career scholarship. This might well explain the somewhat deafening silence on this issue by affected colleagues in the South African higher education context.

Immanent “rules” guide our actions in any assemblage. Academia as discursive practice has traditionally set up implicit and explicit rules that frame our interactions, our daily activities (including scholarly publishing). In applying an immanent ethics, obligation to abide by the parameters of discursive practice depends on how tightly such discursive practice applies rules, or sanctions transgressions. What counts as pushing the limits of acceptability is really the issue at play here. Pushing beyond the threshold of what counts as acceptability triggers a reaction in the assemblage. In this instance, legislative and institutional moderators of the code, step in to reframe the parameters of acceptability. Academy of Science of South Africa (2010) and Department of Higher Education and Training (2015) have, in fact, have stepped in to reinscribe rules that have become blurred—albeit “new” conditions that subjects in the assemblage might not agree with in their entirety. This is, however, the way discursive practices work. So le Grange’s (2019) caution of what he describes as downright dangerous might well be a manifestation of this evolving discursive space. Invoking the notion of immanent ethics does not mean that subjects will emerge unscathed. A necessary dissonance that might create anxiety (and even defensiveness) should not be unexpected. Instead of conceiving of a fixity of identity, in this instance (errant scholar), subjects have capacity to rework, rethink, reestablish, and renew. So, one is not in a state of permanent paralysis—but what this particular kind of subjectivity suggests, is acknowledgement in the first instance of one’s historicity, notwithstanding le Grange’s contention that much of this is still up for debate. This leads me to my next contention, namely, le Grange’s (2019) reading of the position I have taken as self-blame, rather than responsibility.

About self-blame and full responsibility

Le Grange’s reading of the position I have taken on this issue as “self-blame” (his word, 2019, p. 2) is understandable up to a point, given that there is an element of slippage in the way I used the words responsibility and blame. In fact, the word “blame” features just once in my article (Maistry, 2019); the thrust of the argument that permeates the article, though, is that of taking full responsibility. There is a subtle but important difference between self-blame and taking full personal responsibility. The former suggests a hopeless victim (of circumstances) mentality. It also appeals to vicarious blame on institutions and pressures of the neoliberal university (that le Grange argues, is culprit), thus locating the issue outside of oneself. It relies on the external (agents) for resolution that may or may not materialise to rescue the affected subject. Taking full responsibility, on the other hand, restores the locus of control to within the agentic self—a looking inward for positive action. There might be a lesson to be learnt here for affected colleagues who might be waiting in vain for a systemic readjustment to occur. The position, then, is one that identifies the fractures in the system (as I duly did) without remaining fixated on systemic failure alone, but contemplates avoidable personal failings and what might be positive preemptive action in an academic space where

judgement is a valued tradition. Taking full responsibility also means honouring the multiple assemblages that I am affiliated to.

This leads me to a discussion of another somewhat disappointing reading by le Grange (2019), namely, that the position I had taken was that of proposing sanctions and witch hunts (his words) against affected colleagues. I want to, once again, assert that this was furthest from my intent. I did however indicate that:

Research supervisors might have to reconsider nominating examiners. . . . Higher degrees committees also have to give due consideration to a more scrupulous examination of this aspect of their important quality assurance work. The composition of . . . higher degrees committees now necessitates some considered discussion . . . it has implications for the appointment of new colleagues to the university, promotion applications, the holding of senior management and leadership positions, and academic decisions as to who might be deemed credible supervisor. These are indeed very disconcerting issues to deal with, but issues that the higher education community cannot shy away from any longer. (Maistry, 2019, p. 15).

One would expect that the above issues would be a matter of due process for institutions that wish to maintain their academic standing. Le Grange's (2019) argument for adopting a realm of positive action is laudable but I find it somewhat inconceivable that institutions might blissfully proceed with addressing predatory publishing vacuous of the issues raised above. Addressing these issues in and of themselves might well be regarded as adopting a realm of positive action. Perhaps it is worth restating one of the key arguments in the lead article and that is, that academics need to be mindful of the dangerous consequences of what might be perceived as deliberate concealment (Maistry, 2019).

Fuelling the debate on predatory publishing: About contents and containers

Le Grange (2019) was correct in his critique of my uncritical acceptance of Beall's (2013) research and Mouton and Valentine's (2017) report. In fact, he is arguably the first local (South African) scholar to contest the veracity of this scholarship. My earlier argument of capacity and academic capital still holds. It would have been akin to arguing on the proverbial back foot, or arguing defensively. Le Grange (2019) introduced some useful contemporary scholarship to make the case for reading Beall and Mouton and Valentine with circumspection. He offered useful insights into the international world of scholarship production and consumption, and warned us to be aware of the neoliberal market forces at play in the higher education publishing space. Having said this, it might be worth sounding the same caution that le Grange advanced in his own arguments. This leads me to yet another troubling issue in le Grange's account, namely, the definitiveness of his discounting of the Mouton and Valentine (2017) report with regard to the standing of the Kamla-Raj Enterprises (KRE) publishing house.

The selected evidence that le Grange (2019) identified, that of a somewhat wonky argument by Mouton and Valentine in relation to multiple board memberships by Dr Hiebert, casts some doubt on the rigor and quality of the argumentation on *that* particular aspect of their report. Advertising the names of long deceased editorial board members, though, is difficult to defend. Caution is, indeed, required before endorsing a blanket negation of the other compelling evidences about the KRE publishing house. In fact, had le Grange also exercised due diligence and rigor (before moving to this business's defence), by simply browsing the KRE website (www.krepublishers.com), he would have observed without much effort, telltale signs, that all is not well. One such observation is that none of the journals in the KRE stable has a specialist chief or executive editor. There are, however, lengthy lists of members of the editorial boards. A second observation is that each journal publishes 12 issues per year, a somewhat superhuman feat for any chief editor holding an academic position anywhere in the world. The third glaring observation is the inconsistency in language use, together with numerous, somewhat rudimentary grammatical and typographical errors on the landing page of each journal (which, incidentally, is almost the same for every journal). For the journal in which le Grange chose to publish his article (*Journal of Human Ecology*), the following excerpts containing cues of suspicion, were selected from the landing page:

The abstract should consist of 100-150 words. The abstract should be written in complete sentences and should succinctly state the objectives, the experimental design of the paper, and the principal observations and conclusion; it should be intelligible without reference to the rest of the paper. (KRE, n.d.c, Abstract)

The above is evidence of a well-constructed instruction. The extracts below, though, are less impressive and, in some instances, unintelligible.

This journal uses a double-blind review, which means that both the reviewer's and author's identities are concealed from the reviewers, and vice versa, throughout the review process. (KRE, n.d.a, The Peer-Review Process, s. 2)

The referees' are responsible for contributing to the decision-making process. (KRE, n.d.a, The Peer-Review Process, s. 3)

The author's should maintain an accurate record of data associated with their submitted manuscript and supply or provide access to this data when requested. (KRE, n.d.a, Authenticity of the Published Content, s. 2)

Each paper is screened (not reviewed) by the Member of the Editorial Board to check its suitability for favour of publication in the Peer-reviewed Scientific and Research international journal. If it is observed that it can be considered for publication than the Corresponding Author is asked to complete the initial formalities. (Kamla-Raj Enterprises, n.d.b, Manuscript, s. 14)

The methodology section should present explain methods used precisely. Give when were data collected? What questions were used? If an article is not based on any data

but a desktop publication as there's no data collected. However, the author should give explanations about methodology adopted. (KRE, n.d.c, Methodology)

Do not place use et al. (NOT IN ITALICS) when there are more than two authors, i.e., Give names of all the Authors, however you may use et al. After listing at least first three authors. (KRE, n.d.c, Instructions for Listing of References)

Get the paper check from a Professional English Language Editor to avoid typo errors. (KRE, n.d.c, Language and Typographical Errors)

I want to emphasise that the purpose of presenting this data is not to ridicule the language proficiency of this academic publishing house. It is more to make the point that in a country (India) where English has been the medium of instruction in major universities for several decades, that high-standing editorial boards are comfortable with this level of carelessness. In fact, I struggle to believe that le Grange would accept this and still hold that there is an ethic of high-level rigor. Le Grange (2019) proceeded to also quite uncritically accept the communiqué by the Taylor & Francis spokesperson that all is well. It begs the question as to how rigorous Taylor & Francis was, and is, about the workings of the KRE publishing house. It also begs the question as to whether Taylor & Francis is content with this lower standard (even if it exists only on the landing page) for this publishing house that appears to serve a particular clientele. In essence then, the jury is still out as to the credibility of KRE as a publishing house of standing.

It follows that it is not a simple matter of disconnecting the contents from the container. Like le Grange, I stand by the quality of the papers I published in the KRE journals (which, incidentally, followed the same peer review protocol that le Grange (2019) described). I am however far less convinced than le Grange that the container is not so important. Le Grange (2019) cited the recent article by Niewoudt, Dickie, Coetsee, Engelbrecht and Terblanche (“Age- and Education-Related Effects on Cognitive Functioning in Colored South African Women”), an offensive piece that was published in the journal, *Aging, Neuropsychology, and Cognition*. He rightly used this to describe the frailties of this particular journal's peer-review processes—the article triggered much anger and reaction from various quarters of the academic community.

This revelation was indeed profound because it confirms my argument (Maistry, 2019) that the inside-track phenomenon for publishing is still alive and well. It is distinct, unequivocal evidence of how the inside track was effectively applied by a segment of the South African academic fraternity to give credence to racist ideology. It affirms that racism is still alive and thriving in certain sectors of the South African academic community, an argument I lead in an upcoming article in the *South African Journal of Higher Education*, an argument that has relied mainly on anecdotal evidence thus far. This, however, is tangible evidence from which we can infer that other tainted containers might well exist in the local context. Their skill in ticking all the right boxes, as le Grange (2019) rightly argued, gives them license to operate in plain sight. Le Grange implicitly suggested that we should, in fact, be sceptical of both contents *and* container.

Most containers (journals) in South Africa have their genesis in the apartheid era, a period in which it was perfectly “acceptable” to use race as a gatekeeping criterion for knowledge production. It would be unrealistic to believe that immediately after 1994 (the year of the country’s first democratic elections), that this racist practice would miraculously disappear and that the hegemony over this space would rapidly dissipate. All-white editorial boards were the norm at the time. While the state’s affirmative policies started to take effect in other spheres of South African society, the state lacks the legislative machinery to apply affirmative principles to the composition of journal editorial boards. It is difficult to assess the hegemonic hold that the white academic community still has on South African scholarship.

It does, however, raise a pertinent question as to why is it that “culprit” academics (in the predatory publishing debacle) were predominantly non-white colleagues (and from historically disadvantaged institutions), an issue that Mouton and Valentine (2017) appeared to tiptoe around? While this is a speculative question, it is nonetheless a question that South African academia is struggling to ask, and the answer to which is likely to create much angst—downright dangerous terrain, indeed!

I am also not convinced that *predatory publishing* is a misnomer fabricated by Beall on the basis of entirely weak data and analysis. Le Grange (2019) did, however, rightly alert us to the more dangerous demon that invisibly constructs the economic world of academic publishing, namely that of neoliberal capitalism, incentivised by the long-term potential for profit making. Given that the average academic and scholar might not fully apprehend how this works, I offer a brief account of two distinct neoliberal markets at play in the academic publishing space: the neoliberal market for *publishing services*, and the market for *published scholarship*. I offer some tentative implications for academics who have to inhabit this space.

Any economic market is a place where sellers offer (supply) goods or services with utility value, and buyers purchase (demand) such market offerings. In the market for publishing services, numerous publishing houses with various levels of integrity vie for the right to publish a scholar’s work (the supply of publishing services) and scholars (buyers of such services) get to choose from the numerous alternatives available. The market is clearly a differentiated market that offers varying degrees of quality with regard to publishing services offered. High-end publishing houses command higher prices for the services they offer. Discerning buyers, and buyers with the ability to pay, are prepared to pay high prices for the perceived value they anticipate they might enjoy from buying such services. Less discerning buyers, and buyers (scholars) with constrained disposable income, buy what is affordable—with the knowledge that they may not be buying the best product or service on the market.

In the market for scholarly products (published journal articles, books, etc.), buyers include researchers, students, and academics. Sellers are again publishing houses that sell their wares (published articles). This market also offers differentiated products, scholarship of different qualities. An analysis of how open access plays itself out in the market place is worthy of some deliberation. Open-access publishers charge significantly lower prices for publishing services and make published work freely available online. Buyers of these services are

attracted by the low price, quick turnover, and satisfaction of free dissemination. Note, these moves by such publishing houses are certainly not as entirely philanthropic as some might purport. These are businesses with a distinct profit motive. The prices they charge are relatively low, meaning low profit margins. They do, however, cash in on high turnover, 12 issues of 17 journals per annum, with high numbers of articles comprising individual issues (as in the KRE case).

The Taylor & Francis and KRE partnership reflects another key market trait, namely, that of a producer that has strategically decided to have in its portfolio, products of various qualities. They have, in fact, applied product differentiation quite effectively by identifying that the market for publishing services and scholarly products is segmented according to ability to pay. This is akin to a motor vehicle manufacturer that produces and supplies high-end vehicles (with high specs and safety features) and low-end variants (with minimal safety features). The implications for the production and consumption of scholarship is far reaching and beyond the scope of this response piece. It does call for an awareness of how one plays and gets played in this neoliberal market. Le Grange (2019) sounded a telling caution that perceptions of the quality of contents and container have to be understood in the context of how the market has come to shape the production and consumption of knowledge.

Concluding comments

It is clear that le Grange and I differ significantly on several key issues. While we are academic colleagues, he has maintained his usual critical disposition as he engaged with my work. Of importance, is that it was done in a respectful fashion, an ethos that will hopefully encourage further contributions to the debate, rigorous conversations that critically reflect on the (ill-)health of academia as it relates to scholarship, its producers, and its gatekeepers.

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