**Anarchist Women Printers:**

**Old and New Materialisms**

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Prepared for presentation at the

Western Political Science Association Annual Meeting

March 28-30, 2013

Hollywood, California

**Introduction**

This paper examines the activities of women printers in the anarchist movement and elsewhere in the U.S. and Great Britain from the 1870s to the 1940s. I am engaging these printers through the lens of the “old materialism,” that is, Marxist-inspired structural analysis of the conditions of labor, and the “new materialism,” the recent turn to theorizing the capacity of non-human and non-organic entities such as presses to affect and be affected by others. While on one level the two materialisms are very different - the liveliness of objects for the new materialists may look like commodity fetishism to the old – their shared investment in the porous border between people and objects may offer a bridge to connect them. The two materialist traditions share a finely honed suspicion that cause/effect relations are more complex than they appear, that causes can also be effects and effects, causes. The two materialisms also proceed in potentially compatible manners, insisting that the only way to grasp the relations of people to non-people is to dwell at length in the specific material sites of those relations. By looking at anarchist women printers through both perspectives, I aim to explore the gendered conditions of labor within printing while also using this rich historical site to develop connections between the older materialism and the new. I am looking to the experiences of women printers, their forceful exclusion and persistent reappearance, to ask what sort of materialist energies are best recruited to understand the world these women made with presses, other printers, publications, and reading publics.

**Printers, women printers, and anarchist women printers**

To get at the life worlds of anarchist women printers during the late 19th through the mid-20th centuries, the time of greatest flourishing for the classical anarchist movement, I must travel through the larger world of women printers and the much larger world of printers in general. On the one hand, this journey is replete with an abundance of material; as Patrick Duffy notes in *The Skilled Compositor,* “More has probably been written about printing than about any other trade” (p. 1). On the other hand, printers themselves tend not to write about printing, so reflections on the collaborations of printers and presses are difficult to find. Similarly, anarchist women who were printers had a great deal to say about anarchism, and about the practices of power and resistance that anarchists encountered, but relatively little to say about the practices of printing. I have collected the relevant scraps I could find, and knitted them into tales by and of women printers and the printing trade in general, in order to arrive at some informed speculation concerning the assemblages of participants and the ordering processes creating anarchism’s radical textual counterpublic.[[1]](#footnote-1)

During the time in question, the physical labor of printing in general, and printing by cash-strapped radical publications in particular, had not changed very much for several hundred years. While the linotype was invented in late 19th century, it was too expensive for most radicals to acquire. Anarchist printers continued to use letterpress technology well past World War II, and some have returned to it today.[[2]](#footnote-2) The letter press created, in Cynthia Cockburn’s words, “twin crafts: that of the *compositor,* who arranged the separate pieces of movable type to form words and lines of text; and that of the *pressman*, who applied ink to the printing surface and pressed paper against this to produce an image” (1984, p.15, italics in original). The compositor stands or sits in front of a large wooden case, subdivided into dozens of small boxes, like a busy, crowded apartment house for language. Each cubicle houses an uppercase letter, a lower case letter, a punctuation mark, or a blank. The compositor selects the metal or wooden letters and marks, called *sorts*, one at a time, and assembles them, upside down and backwards, on a *composing stick*. The *face* is the raised letter or symbol on one side of the sort. The *nick* is the narrow channel down another side of the sort, to guide the compositor’s fingers in placing the sort properly on the stick. When the stick is full, the compositor transfers the line of type to a *galley*, a shallow tray. When the galley is filled, a proof is created and proofread, then sent back to the compositor who corrects errors with a small sharp tool called a *bodkin*. The type is then placed in a *chase*, a metal frame that can be locked by filling in blank space with wooden blocks of various sizes and shapes. The completed form is sent to the pressroom for production and the bindery for assembly.[[3]](#footnote-3)

It was exacting work, requiring significant strength and stamina, and often performed under unhealthy conditions, as was mining, textile work, farming, factory work, domestic labor, and other jobs that working class women routinely performed. It was also creative work, requiring literacy, mathematical calculations, an eye for visual design, and the ability to figure out what the text should say. The work requires an intimacy with the press that suggests more than “use,” something more like improvisation, participation, co-action. Contemporary artists and designers who are revitalizing letterpress printing are recovering the sense of collaboration with the press. Contemporary anarchist printer Peter Good, who writes and prints *The Cunningham Amendment* on an old hand press, calls up the poetry of Gerald Manley Hopkins to think about the “inscape” of printing, which Good understands as a relation in which the press “radiates back a meaning” to the printer. Good applies Hopkins’ idea of “sprung rhythm” to characterize the constant adjustments required to the printing apparatus in order to carry on. The feedback loops between printer and press, in Good’s words, “makes the variations more flexible without losing the feel of the basic rhythm.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

The earliest evidence of women working as printers in the west comes from Florence in 1476, where the nuns of the Convent of San Jacopo di Ripoli printed “the first complete edition of the works of Plato” (Davidson, p. 6). Women usually came into printing through religious orders or by working in/inheriting a print shop of their fathers, husbands or brothers. There were a few presses run by and sometimes for women. At some presses, such as Dun Emer Press (Later Cuala Press) in Dublin, founded by Elizabeth Corbet Yeats (sister of William Butler Yeats), the artistry of these tasks was cultivated: at Dun Emer Press women were taught fine needlecraft and weaving as well as printing, bookbinding, and the Irish language (Davidson, p. 11). Elizabeth Yeats was inspired, as were the anarchists, by William Morris and the Arts and Crafts movement’s insistence on integrating beautiful, hand-made artifacts into daily life. At other presses, the production process was less an artistic than a business enterprise. In 1861, Emily Faithfull and Bessie Rayner Parkes established Victoria Press in London to teach women the printing trade; they combined for-profit management with goals of social reform, providing training and employment for women in a healthy, well-ventilated shop. Victoria Press ran successfully for over twenty years and won the patronage of Queen Victoria (Tusan, p. 113). Other early enterprises training and employing women printers included the Queen’s Institute in Ireland, Caledonian Press in Edinburgh, and Women’s Cooperative Print Society (later Women’s Printing Society, or WPS). Michelle Tusan characterizes the WPS as an early “feminist community-based business organization” because the apprenticeships were paid and the workers shared in the profits as well as collecting a wage (p. 115).

The situation for women printers was similar in the U.S. Most women got access to the trade through male relatives. Yet, because of “the scarcity of skilled labor in colonial America,” there were, initially, more opportunities for women (Davidson, p. 11). Elizabeth Harris Glover owned and ran the first printing press in the English colonies, after her husband Jose Glover died on the voyage from England. Mary Katherine Goddard printed the Declaration of Independence; women were official commissioned printers in Rhode Island, Maryland, and Pennsylvania (Davidson, p. 12). Printing establishments by and for women were founded in San Francisco and other western cities as well (Davidson, p. 13). Later, there were serious campaigns by social reformers, including Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, to train women from the garment trades in a semi-skilled capacity as typesetters. Dubbed “the petticoat invasion” by male union printers, it ultimately failed, because (among other problems) the women were inadequately trained for a job that could not actually be deskilled (Baron, 1982, p. 32).

By the late 19th century-early 20th century, men dominated typesetting and pressing, even though there were significant minorities of women in some areas. Early and strong union organizing allowed male printers to unite in minimizing women’s access to jobs and training. “Protective” legislation sometimes prohibited women from working at night, when newspapers would have needed their labor (Cockburn, 1984, p. 30). The printers unions “organized to exclude women and were not ashamed to say so” (Cockburn, 1984, p. 153). Cleverly, some unions pressured employers to hire women at the same pay as men, knowing that the employers’ only reason for seeking women was to pay them less.

In Boston in 1884, fully one quarter of the city’s compositors were women (Baron, 1987, p. 69). In contrast, in Toronto in 1889, typographical union local 91 had 35 women compositors, but 595 men (union and nonunion), working in the city (Burr, p. 54). In Scotland, where women printers achieved much initial success, male union leaders organized in 1909 to ban the growing numbers of women compositors and apprentices, at first temporarily, then permanently (Cockburn, 1984, pp. 153-154). In the next half century, women’s percentage of the skilled printing jobs in Scotland fell by half, while their percentage of the unskilled jobs more than doubled (Cockburn, 1984, p. 159).

There was a widespread belief among men that women were constitutionally incapable of printing as well as men, and that the parts of the job that women did were thereby easier and less valuable. When it came to the work recognized as skilled, the common view was that women could not do the job, and they should not do the job. Printing was held, by the men who did it, to be physically unsuitable for women, who also lacked the mental ability to stick with the job and the “natural temperament” to work with machines (Cockburn, 1984, p. 191). Further, women should not take away a man’s livelihood, should not work in sexually mixed environments, and should not go out at night. Writer and printer Walker Rumble, calling on union records and newspaper reports of the day, summarizes the situation in this way:

Women had long insisted that they could perform alongside men in most of the workrooms of a printing establishment, certainly newspaper composing rooms. Men, especially union men, insisted they could not. Some reasons were traditional and silly: women were careless, women lacked patience to decipher badly handwritten copy. Above all, women could not take the routine grind. The women might last a day or two, but by midweek, “many a member of the craft was willing to bet…that the ladies would succumb to the strain upon them.” They did no such thing. (p. 626)

While the compositors and pressmen were usually men, there were always lots of women in bookbinding. In what Cockburn calls “printing proper,” in Britain, in 1851 there were 300 women; by 1871 there were 700, and by 1891 women’s numbers had grown to 4,500 (1984, p. 23). A minority of these were compositors, while most were doing the folding and sewing that constituted “finishing operations” in print shops (Cockburn, 1984, p. 24). In contrast, in 1851, there were 3,500 women bookbinders; by 1871, there were 7,000; by 1891, there were 14,200 (Cockburn, 1984, p. 23). Laboring for little pay under poor conditions, the women were “mainly folding the printed sheets, collating the sections and doing the preparatory stitching” (Cockburn, 1984, p. 23). In short, the craft of printing offered significant but also uncertain opportunities for women, within a complicated set of class and gender conflicts.

A somewhat more felicitous situation could be found among anarchist women printers. Anarchist journals were the heart of anarchist communities (see Zimmer). There were many hundreds of them, perhaps thousands, all around the world. Groups organized around publications and invested enormous resources in writing, producing and distributing their work. Anarchist groups needed their own printers, or at least printers who were sympathetic to the movement, because police harassment would often discourage commercial printers from accepting anarchist materials. Anarchist groups were typically small, and included significant numbers of women. Generally committed to gender equality, most of the time, anarchist publications mounted fewer barriers for women to learn and employ the printing trades. Although the most famous of the anarchist printers, including Joseph Ishill, Harry Kelly, John Turner, and Jo Labadie, were men, a determined search of the pages of anarchist journals from the 1870s to the 1940s turns up a goodly number of women printers.

Lillian Harmon was compositor for the anarchist journal *Lucifer, the Light-Bearer*, edited by her father Moses Harmon, and co-editor of another anarchist journal, *Fair Play*, with her partner E.C. Walker. We can infer her skill by the drop in quality of the journal when she was imprisoned, as well as her father’s laments at her absence. Moses Harmon was reduced to putting out the journal singlehandedly when his daughter and partner were imprisoned for cohabitation, and he asked his readers for forbearance since he did not have the skill to match Lillian’s work. Georgia Replogle was compositor and co-editor for the individualist anarchist journal *Egoism*. Adalgisa **Guabello** immigrated with her brother Paolo to Paterson, NJ, in 1904 and became active in the Italian anarchist movement; she worked in the print shop of her husband, anarchist Alberto Guabello (Guglielmo, p. 153). Emma Langdon was a printer in Colorado, where she published the Cripple Creek Record singlehandedly after the male workers were jailed for criticizing the mining companies; she was later honored by the anarchist-friendly Western Miners Federation (Boyer and Morris, pp. 152-153). With her husband Maximiliano Olay, Anna Olay operated the Spanish Labor Press Bureau, a news service of the Spanish anarchists during their revolution and civil war (Zimmer, p. 424). Margaret Anderson, co-editor of the anarchist-oriented *Little Review*, had been a printer (Stansell, p. 266). Anarchist Sonya Deanim printed and clandestinely distributed *Frayhayt,* while Brona Greenburg ran an underground press in Warsaw in the 1930s (Avrich 2005, pp. 336, 465). Teenage sisters Helen and Olivia Rosetti edited and printed *The Torch* in London (Goldman, p. 165). Lois Waisbrooker edited, wrote, and set type for Our Age, Foundational Principles, and Clothed with the Sun (Passet, p. 237). These examples suggest that, among the anarchists, women frequently both wrote and produced the journals and continued to work as compositors while they wrote and edited. In contrast to the circumstances of printing in mainstream newspapers, book production, or commercial jobs, anarchist women and men printers worked in homes, bookstores, schools, community centers, or underground facilities, their work intimately woven into the political activism of the groups who wrote, edited, and distributed the journals.

**“Old Materialisms”**

No matter how many scare quotes I attach to the appellations “old” and “new” materialisms, problems still arise with such glib categories. This way of parsing distinctions overstates the “before” and “after” quality of the two, when both have long histories as well as contemporary expressions.[[5]](#footnote-5) Calling the new materialism “critical” is also unfortunate, suggesting that the old was somehow complacent while the new is cutting-edge. I’m settling, for now, on the language of “old” and “new” in order to get a rough working terminology that makes a distinction without insisting on a hierarchy.

A glance through some of the classics of socialist feminist analysis happily recalls how capacious it was and is. We may forget that Simone de Beauvoir rather casually assumed that socialism was fundamental to *The Second Sex,* or that the subtitle of Donna Haraway’s “A Manifesto for Cyborgs” was “Science, Technology and Socialist Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century.” Socialist feminists use feminism and Marxism, or socialism more broadly construed, to transform one another. They debate relations of socialist feminism to psychoanalysis and developmental psychology. They analyze histories of social movements, patterns of work force participation, relations of labor to family life, revolutionary struggles, and intersections of sexuality, race, and ethnicity. They stimulate debates that issued in a host of conversations and struggles toward better feminist theory and practice. I am calling this the “old materialism” not because it is out of date, but because it entered feminist debates earlier and has become a relatively well-established tool of feminist analysis.

Cynthia Cockburn, Ava Baron, Christine Burr, and other socialist or Marxist feminists have led the way in bringing gender and class analysis into fruitful conversations about printers. Cockburn summarizes the world of printers as “a patriarchal craft culture, with a strong trade-union identification” (1984, p. 3). Printers were part of the proletarian elite. Yet, the printing trade was experiencing segmentation, with daily papers separated from the production of books, magazines, posters, and other jobs and threatened by employers’ efforts at deskilling. Printers tried to preserve their status by hoarding their knowledge, often keeping apprenticeships closed to all but family members. They usually tried to keep women out, fearing women’s effect as competitors and potential scabs. Cynthia Cockburn sees the printer as a problem for class unity, because as a skilled worker he saw himself as above unskilled laborers as well as “lord of his household,” the breadwinner supporting wife and children (1981, p. 41). She stresses the significance of the male monopoly on skilled physical labor: “*The appropriation of muscle, capability, tools, and machinery by men is an important source of women’s subordination, indeed it is part of the process by which females are constituted as women”* (1981, p. 44, italics in original)The combination women = weak and dependence = feminine policed the gender politics of printing. Importantly for my purposes, the links of “muscle, capability, tools and machinery” are also constitutive of printers in general, marking a circulation of energies and intensities in which the press was a collaborator, not merely a passive site for the collaborations of others.

One of the ways that women’s exclusion was enforced was to keep women out of the mandatory apprenticeships. Cockburn characterizes the required seven year apprenticeships as “a patriarchal ascendancy that spanned employment and domestic life” (1984, p. 16). As the early English statutes specified, the apprenticeship was designed to produce a “free *man*” (1984, p. 17). Apprentices typically were boys who moved to the home of the master printer, living under often oppressive conditions; they were unpaid, while their food, clothing and shelter, such as was provided, were attended by the women of the household. Women were not allowed to be apprentices; their way into the craft, barring membership in a religious order, was to inherit a print shop or marry into one.

Unions were sites of exclusion as well as battles for inclusion: from its inception in 1852 until 1869, the International Typographical Union excluded women. In 1869, New York compositor Augusta Lewis started Women’s Typographical No 1, “the first all-female labor union in the country.” In 1870, a Boston printer named Mrs. Lane attempted a similar move but was unsuccessful. Over the next 16 years, some ITU locals “reluctantly opened their doors to women,” while others, including Boston’s local no. 13, refused (Rumble, p. 628).

Male journeymen dominated the larger newspapers, where pay was highest, and women tended to work for book publishers or small job-printing shops, where pay and professional standing were diminished. The culture of the saloon, print shop and union hall was often hostile to women. The press and its objects could be vehicles for that hostility. The “sharp eyes and sensitive fingers” of the printers allowed them to recognize fonts by feel. Sorts generally possessed a “nick,” a single indent on the side to assist compositors in aligning the sorts by feel. Printer Ted Morse recalls, “The right hand forefinger touching the nicks of foundry type being assembled into lines in the stick was part of the skill of hand-setting for 500 years.” Morse goes on to note the convenience of the nick for mocking women printers: “The ‘feel’ acquired by astute journeymen in hand-setting extended to nicknaming female printers ‘two nicks” (Morse, p. 120).

In addition to the overt efforts of men’s unions and male printers to exclude or confine women in their grades, there were more subtle ways to disadvantage women. There was often considerable overlap of jobs in the print industry, especially in the jobs that typically went to men. The compositor was often a “sub-editor, proofreader, engineer, press feeder, ad solicitor” as well (Hicks, p. 13. 135, 151, 188, 199). Journalists often started out as printers; editors drafted printers to report or edit; printers move up to be successful editors. Many famous writers started out as printers. The more humble itinerant printers were proud of the brotherhood they shared with their famed colleagues: Mark Twain, Hicks remarks, was “proud of his ability as a printer.” A young printer named Burns Mantle became a highly regarded New York drama critic, and “to the day of his death… carried a paid-up working card in the Denver Typographical Union.” Editor and reformer Horace Greeley was president of New York typographical local #6 and famously remarked, “A printer’s case is a better education than a high school or a college” (Hicks, pp. 49, 104, 113, 270). Walt Whitman was a skilled printer who stayed involved in the production process: one scholar notes, “Whitman did not just write his book, he made his book, and he made it over and over again, each time producing a different material object that spoke to its readers in different ways” (Folsom). The literary successes of former printers elevated the intellectual life of all printers.

Women’s usual labor, in contrast, offered fewer such opportunities to move among tasks and develop a capacity to participate in the whole trade. As stated earlier, women’s work was largely in the feeding of the press, collating and folding of the paper, and stitching of the binding. These jobs were called unskilled because women did them and they were less likely to lead to higher positions. Additionally, proofreading was often considered women’s work. The gender segregation in the industry at large continued through the mid-twentieth century: a 1947 recruitment film for the printing industry, entitled “Letterpress Printing Vocational Film” reveals the same general division of labor. Thus the women were less able to move among the tasks of reading, writing and producing texts, and less able to identify with printers’ literary successes or ambitions. Among anarchists, in contrast, such specialization was not available; both women and men printers engaged in a wide range of mental and manual labor to produce their journals, situating women printers more firmly within the flows of ideas, machines and bodies that issued in the remarkable outpouring of public speech contributed by anarchists.

A struggle within anarchist ranks over women printers mirrored the larger situation in the trade, and shows that male anarchists were not exempt from the conventional class/gender nexus within which women printers on the whole were placed. While gender equality was generally endorsed, at least in theory, among anarchists, nonetheless the individualist anarchist journal *Egoism* hosted a debate over women printers that echoed the disputes in the larger publishing world. From 1888-1891 *Egoism* featured a debate between the well-known American individualist anarchist Benjamin Tucker, editor of *Liberty*, and Georgia Replogle, the co-editor of *Egoism.* Replogle was also *Egoism’s* compositor. Tucker repeated the familiar charges regarding “the special inferiority of woman as printer” (1888), while Replogle modestly asserted that at least a few women had mastered the trade. In her December, 1891 issue, Replogle defended women printers’ right to equal pay for equal work and praised the quality of their work. The highly respected editor of *Liberty* argued against; he maintained that, “Apart from the special inferiority of woman as printer…there exists the general inferiority of women as worker...” (in Marsh, p. 543). The curmudgeonly Tucker stood out in anarchist circles for his stubborn insistence that women printers should be paid less than men, even when their work was of equal quality (Tucker, 1891, pp. 2-3). Replogle pointed out in reply that in San Francisco, where *Egoism* was produced, 105 of the working union printers were women and were paid equal wages; she took this as “strong evidence that at least that fraction of the sex had practically mastered the accomplishment.” Similarly, in other west coast cities, Replogle noted that in one a woman was foreman, in another the head of advertising: “ …so far as personal observation goes, the women seem as useful as the men. They work as steadily, as fast, require no different accommodations, and their product sells for the same price in the market” (Replogle, 1891, p. 1). To my knowledge, Tucker never acknowledged the irony of carrying on this surly dispute in the beautifully printed pages of Georgia Replogle’s journal.[[6]](#footnote-6)

The debate between Replogle and Tucker fits quite well into the class/gender nexus analyzed by the “old materialism.” Both Replogle and Tucker fell within the strand of anarchism called individualist, as opposed to the better known collectivist or communist threads. They embraced small-scale private ownership of land and tools, seeing private property on this scale as a vehicle to resist the power of states. Unlike later libertarians, they did not advocate nor defend corporate capitalism, but insisted that individual ownership provided a safety net for otherwise vulnerable farmers and workers. Yet obviously Replogle’s and Tucker’s shared perspective on economic matters was cross-cut by a clear difference on gender matters. For Tucker, the operations of the market, with regard to women printers, were not relevant, because women’s “special inferiority” trumped the operations of supply and demand. Tucker can be seen as the pro-market mirror image of the good union men who drew the line at including women; like the supposedly “natural” operation of markets in Tucker’s view, the supposedly universal class struggle faltered upon the laboring bodies of women printers.

**“New Materialisms”**

Cockburn’s analysis of gender and class in the printing trades inspires me to attempt to continue her work in a somewhat different direction. Cockburn intervenes in the arguments about compositors as “the aristocracy of labor” by stressing the role of working class persons in creating the class and gender imperatives within which they struggled.[[7]](#footnote-7) She finds that arguments about class formations often fail to look at the workers as actors. By bringing compositors into the picture, she is able to interrogate their self-understanding as a higher class of workers, seeing it as “part and parcel of the conflict between capital and labour, not a sign of its absence” (1984, p. 32). My goal is to do something similar for presses, to bring the physical presence of the press into the discussion, not as an inert object but as an actant, capable of effecting and being effected. Cockburn and other socialist feminist scholars have changed the questions we can ask of printing; perhaps the influence of the new materialists can keep up the process, opening still more lines of inquiry.

Consider Cockburn’s argument for integrating two analytic frames, socialist and feminist:

The desire of a man to ‘keep’ a wife, hemmed within the home, in a strictly sexually-polarized social division of labour, and on his wage alone, is not something that can be explained by class theory. It requires reference to a sex/gender system. It is men as men who benefit from personal rights over the domestic labour, sexuality and reproductive capacity of a wife. It is in the light of this fact that the militancy of printers has to be assessed. It is true that one should not inscribe the trade unionism of the nineteenth century with possibilities it may never have had. However, if we are to formulate new trade-union strategies for the future (as I invite in the final chapter of this book), we need to be clear at least as to what trade unionism has *not* been in the past. It has not had within it that feminism and egalitarianism which informed some other social movements – including aspects of the English revolution of the seventeenth century and Owenism in the 1830s. The struggle to keep women competitors out of work and to wrest from the employers a wage sufficient to keep an entire family may have seemed to the men at the time, as it is often represented today, a necessary class struggle, pure and simple. It was, nonetheless, also a struggle by men to assure patriarchal advantage. (1984, p. 35)

I do not mean that there is some group of actors who are trying to keep the presses out of the conversation in order to protect vested interests, or that I am somehow riding to the presses’ rescue. I am not proposing the press as the newest candidate for the role of the slave in the master/slave relation. Yet, there is a gigantic weight of inherited tradition that assumes the distinction between living and non-living, between mechanical and organic, is a bright line fixed in nature. What if we did not agree to inhabit that tradition any longer? What if we cultivated a different set of inheritances, those from Spinoza and Lucretius rather than, say, Descartes and Newton? Drawing on Spinoza’s reflections on “conative bodies that strive to enhance their power of activity by forming alliances with other bodies” (Bennett, p. x), Jane Bennett and other new materialists offer us a chance to move in that direction. Conative bodies are associative “in the sense that each is, by its very nature as a body, continuously affecting and being affected by other bodies” (Bennett, p. 21). Since, in the end, everything is made of the same “stuff,” distinctions that appear to be written into the nature of things on one level can dissolve or mutate into connections on another. As Diana Coole and Samantha Frost explain, “materiality is always something more than ‘mere’ matter: an excess, force, vitality, relationality or difference that renders matter active, self-creative, productive, unpredictable” (p. 9). Cockburn cultivates a strong phenomenological dimension of inquiry, including the lived experiences of printers in her analysis of the class/gender production of printing. She locates her work within “a revival in Marxist work of the practice of seeing capital not just as an economic category but as a relation between human beings” (1984, p. 5). This insistence that a phenomena is a space within which condensed sets of relationships linger and act can work for new materialism as well. Presses and other things can come into this discussion, not just as technological categories but as participants in relations among actants.

New materialists do not necessarily lose the phenomenological orientation, as Sara Ahmed suggests, but make use of it: “Phenomenology helps us to explore how bodies are shaped by histories, which they perform in their comportment, their posture, and their gestures” (p. 246). Our orientation toward the objects that our bodies regularly encounter can be recalibrated, as Ahmed shows in her intriguing reflections on tables; they can become “disorientation device[s], making things lose their place, which means the loss of coherence of a certain world” (p. 254). In new materialist apprehensions of things, I find the resources to think of presses as reorientation devices, remaking possibilities for coherence through their enduring proximities and physical interventions. I speculate that anarchist groups, consistently organized around their journals, brought the press into the political process as something like what Ahmed calls “a kinship object,” a place/thing that allowed them “to cohere as a group” (p. 248).

At the same time, any appeal to lived experience encouraged by new materialism also complicates phenomenological orientations by lifting our notion of life out of its subject-centered anchors and seeing it as a circulating power, a phenomenon of aliveness not fully contained in any of its organic expressions. Bennett appeals to Deleuze and Guattari to develop this notion: “A life thus names a restless activeness, a destructive-creative force presence that does not coincide fully with any specific body. A life tears the fabric of the actual without ever coming fully ‘out’ in a person, place, or thing. A life points to what *A Thousand Plateaus* describes as ‘matter-*movement*’ or ‘matter-*energy*,” a matter in variation that enters assemblages and leaves them” (Bennett, p. 54). The pace of these “incipient qualities” may largely be “below the threshold of human discernment” (Bennett, p. 58), yet printers collaborating with their tools and materials can often glimpse what those things can do (Bennett, p. 60).

What if we easily inhabited thought worlds that contested the ontological primacy of humans and the bright red line between life and not-life? We are all “mosaics,” Bennett tells us via Lucretius, all made up of “well-mingled seed” (Bennett, p. 22). If we can value our mosaic-ness, in both our identities and our theories, we could anticipate encounters between old and new materialisms to open up cause/effect relations and rethink matter as temporal rather than fixed. Just as encounters between socialism and feminism have found themselves in both felicitous civil partnerships and unhappy marriages, old and new materialisms could challenge and sustain each other. The inquiries of new materialists, Coole and Frost suggest, can provoke “new forms of open Marxism” in which open-ended trajectories of relations replace the will toward totalization (p. 29). Rather than expecting or desiring neat packages of finished arguments, we could value the excess that is produced when concepts meet, the non-identity left over. In that context, we could locate the presses within Derrida’s idea of a “trajectory” - “the open-ended *promissory* quality of a claim, image or entity” (Bennett, p. 32)(italics in original), and imagine “causality” as dispersed, emergent, networked.

Bennett importantly encourages us to leave room in our thinking for the workings of older materialisms, while still entertaining the possibilities offered by “thing power:” “the strange ability of ordinary, man-made items to exceed their status as objects and to manifest traces of independence or aliveness, constituting the outside of our own experience” (B, p. xiv). She points us toward “human-nonhuman assemblage[s]” to discern “the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle”(Bennett, p. 6). All bodies, Bennett tells us, are affective in that they share “the capacity of any body for activity and responsiveness” (Bennett, p. xii). If metal, in Bennett’s hands, can be said to have a “life,” then what can we make of the life of a press? What “material recalcitrance” does it offer, what ability does it have to produce effects, to intervene?[[8]](#endnote-1)

Like many tools, presses affect the bodies of the users. Cockburn reports meeting elderly printers “whose fingers and thumbs are physically flattened by a lifetime shifting type” (1984, p. 47). Linotype operators compare their relation to their machines “to that of intelligent and informed car drivers to a car. They wouldn’t handle a major breakdown perhaps, but they would maintain and service it, sensitive to all its quirks.” (Cockburn 1984, p. 48). What does it mean to say that machines have “quirks”? This could mean, not that spirits reside within matter but that matter itself participates in complex interlocking networks of interactions containing both patterns and unpredictabilities.

Bennett invites us to become vital materialists, to

linger in those moments during which [we] find [our]selves fascinated by objects, taking them as clues to the material vitality that [we] share with them. This sense of a strange and incomplete commonality with the out-side may induce vital materialists to treat nonhumans – animals, plants, earth, even artifacts and commodities – more carefully, more strategically, more ecologically. (pp. 17-18)

Bennett’s invitation is particularly appropriate for the press and the printing process, as can perhaps be witnessed in the remarkable renaissance of letterpress work in recent years.[[9]](#footnote-8) The dynamic energies of presses and printers form an “open whole” in which various relations gather, folding in some elements, changing some aspects, preserving others, and expelling still others (Bennett, p. 35).

Skilled printers talk about their work as having a satisfying movement and rhythm, of being “on the go” (Cockburn 1984, p. 49). The practiced compositor’s labor is useful, creative, and fast, an effortless flow of letters, words, sentences. Printers describe the loss of that satisfaction as “soullessness” (Cockburn 1984, p. 116). The compositors Cockburn interviewed, who were displaced by computerization in the 1970s and 80s, were bitter in part because the new skills - typing and handling paper - were feminized rather than manly skills. But their grief expressed not only residual gender anxiety, but also the loss of a relationship that was formative: the press, while not exactly a comrade, was more than a means to an end; it was a participant in a flow of thoughts, feelings, nerves and sinews. Cockburn calls on Marx’s understanding of “the collective labourer” in *Capital* to see the newspaper shop as “a social system of co-operating work groups.” (1984, p. 119). With Deleuze and Guattari, we can nudge Marx’s understanding of “a living production machine” to a more expansive sort of becoming, one in which nonorganic and organic things resonate and work upon one another.

A last vignette about the struggles of women printers may provide an opening.

In the 1880s and 1880s, some ITU locals “reluctantly opened their doors to women,” while others, including Boston’s local no. 13, refused, until events initiated by women printers induced change (Rumble, p. 628). The change was enabled by one of the popular typesetting races, which ordinarily excluded women. When George Graham was crowned “the champion typesetter of all New England” in Boston in 1886, the first and, it turns out, last women’s contest was also allowed. The host of the contest, Austin & Stone’s Dime Museum, “staged the women’s contest to be identical to the men’s in every way” except for those circumstances that disadvantaged the women, such as the nearby distractions of loud music and noisy performing monkeys, along with some combination of carelessness and sabotage that resulted in a shortage of the right kind of sort (Rumble, p. 615). The race was won by Miss L. J. Kenney, with Miss White coming in second and Miss Francis, third. All three of them scored higher than all the male typesetters in the men’s race, including “the champion of all New England.” Kenney beat Graham by 950 ems, White by 650 ems, and Francis by 475 ems (Rumble, p. 625).[[10]](#footnote-9)

The men now faced a dilemma, which they cleverly resolved by lying about the circumstances of the race while making sure there was never another one. The printers’ account of the races, as told in *A Collation of Facts Relative to Fast Typesetting,* mentioned that the women had been reported to outscore the men but opined that “much latitude was allowed the ladies in the matter of time and proofs, [so] their scores cannot take rank as genuine records” (Rumble, p. 161). This untruth may have saved face but was evidently insufficient as a plan, because Boston Local 13 of the ITU began discussions about admitting women days after the race, and acted to do so four months later. Rumble comments, “Hoping to contain what it could not conquer, Boston’s printing union acted expeditiously to bring women into the fold” (p. 628). For good measure, there was never another race at which men’s and women’s performance could be compared.

Fully apprehending the struggles of these women printers requires, I think, continued infusions of insight from the class/gender analyses of the old materialism. Women were positioned differently than men in the family structures and class orders, and the patriarchal and capitalist logic of their lives is central to a successful understanding today. Misses Francis, Kenney, and White likely cultivated a structural analysis of the obstacles to their success as printers. Bystanders noticed that the women were not primarily trying to beat each other. They were trying to beat the men, and they succeeded. The joker who substituted sorts carrying two nicks, rather than the standard one, in the women’s cases at the Boston race was reinforcing women’s structural subordination, not simply having a laugh at the women’s expense. The double nick initially threw Miss Francis off her stride, but she recovered, and on the second day the women solved the problem by “attentively distribut[ing] their own type (Rumble, p. 628).

At the same time, the remarkable story of the women’s race comes alive at a different level when folded in with the analytic energies of the new materialism. When the unexpected twin-nicked sorts confounded Miss Francis, we might see that as a moment when the printer confronted what Bill Brown calls “the thingness of objects”:

We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily. The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation. (p. 4)

The sorts stopped working, acting unexpectedly on Miss Francis who in turn adjusted her encounters with the sorts in order to reduce the number of turned letters. Similarly, the utter perfection of Miss Kenney’s performance suggests an aesthetic experience something like a song or a dance: Miss Kenney, “in her graceful way… simply never made mistakes” (Rumble, p. 624). Imagine the remarkable sensory encounter required, the intense concentration, flexible spine, and flying hands, which would have been required to *never* make a mistake. By the second day of the women’s weeklong race, the hall hosting the competition was filled with male compositors, “earnestly interested in seeing how well the thing could be done.” “‘No mistake,’ mused one, ‘they can set type’” (Rumble, p. 626).

**Conclusion**

Cockburn and Bennett agree that, to fully explore the terrain into which they are moving, they have to be there. Quite remarkably, Cockburn attended the London College of Printing for one year to study the new and old technologies (1984, p. 1). She learned typesetting early in her studies in 1978, noting, “It is impossible to understand the claims and counter-claims about skill without understanding the labour process on which they are founded” (1984, p. 46). Bennett similarly notes that new materialist thinking requires “a cultivated, patient, sensory attentiveness to nonhuman forces operating outside and inside the human body” (Bennett, p. xiv). Both echo the methodological attitude Foucault finds necessary for genealogy: “grey, meticulous, and patiently documentary” (p.139). This convergence around the need for sustained intimacy with materials could have a healthy impact on our scholarship, taking us into archives, communities, training programs, wilderness areas, work places, public streets, playgrounds, – wherever useful encounters can be found or made.

Of course there are risks. Bennett is willing to risk “a bit of anthropomorphizing,” even the possibility of looking foolish, to get at the world Deleuze and Guatarri characterize in *A Thousand Plateaus* as “matter-movement” or “matter-energy”:

In a vital materialism, an anthropomorphic element in perception can uncover a whole world of resonances and resemblances, sounds and sights that echo and bounce far more than would be possible were the universe to be a hierarchical structure. We at first may see only a world in our own image, but what appears next is a swarm of ‘talented’ and vibrant materialities (including the seeing self). (Bennett, p. 99)

Feminists have a long history of being willing to look foolish in order to contest naturalizations of gender/race/class/sexuality that conveniently confirm existing hierarchies of power and knowledge. I hope that we continue in that vein, probing the limits of the “obvious” in order to bring fresh insights into focus.

Cockburn sees two intellectual projects at work within her apprehension of printers: “The story of compositors in printing, as I have sketched it here, has unfolded within two major processes: developments in relations between classes and in relations between sexes” (1984, p. 191). I want to maintain her momentum while weaving in a third trajectory, the relations among people and machines. She rightly insists that “*the events themselves cannot be understood unless read from both* [many] *perspectives*” (1984, p. 194, italics in original). In the early 1980s, Cockburn found that she and other analysts of printing could readily see class at work, but had trouble bringing sex and gender into the mix. Thanks to the work of these feminist scholars, we can now readily bring in sex and gender, but things as actants have not yet made a full entrance. The capacious logic of intersectional thinking, fortunately, provides a point of entry. Cockburn notes, “We don’t live two lives, one as a member of a class, the other as a man or a woman. Everything we do takes its meaning from our membership of both systems” (1984, p. 195). But of course there are more than two “systems;” perhaps there are innumerable assemblages resonating among us. It generally takes those excluded by an unfavorable inclusion to point this out. Broadly speaking, people of color bring in race, ethnicity, and coloniality to the mix; gays, lesbians, bisexual and transgendered folk bring in sexuality; disability activists bring in able-bodiedness; children and the elderly bring in age. It is my hope that printers and their fellow travellers can bring in presses, inviting their inclusion as actants. The smaller but intense and productive ranks of anarchist printers, I hope, can further provoke us to understand and appreciate the unconventional political energies that alliances of actants can perform.

We might approach these questions through the fertile concept of “skill.” Cockburn offers an intriguing parsing of skill and deskilling:

There is the skill that resides in the man himself, accumulated over time, each new experience adding something to a total ability. There is the skill demanded by the job – which may or may not match the skill in the workers. And there is the political definition of skill: that which a group of workers or a trade union can successfully defend against the challenge of employers and of other groups of workers. (1984, p. 113)

Until the latter half of the 20th century, the three were on the whole co-terminous for male compositors. For skilled women printers they usually were not: the women could enjoy the skill residing in their minds and bodies, and the skill demanded by the job, but they lacked the collective position from which to defend their labor. Perhaps the presses themselves could be understood as “skilled,” in the sense that they act as connectors for capacities that can and must flow through them in order to be manifest.

Cockburn also brings in the importance of the outcome of the printers’ labor in an assessment of skill. She insists, “skill cannot, in the last resort, be evaluated without also evaluating its product” (1984, p. 121). Here, the anarchist printers were way ahead: they loved and honored their journals. Like the English political pamphleteers whom Cockburn recalls, the anarchists put their skills to work for their political movement, producing useful outcomes for themselves and their colleagues. “Applying skills to bad ends is also a kind of deskilling,” Cockburn insists (1984, p. 122). In this light, anarchist printers were/are among the most skilled of workers. Their remarkable persistence, in the face of relentless hounding by governments, might be partly due to the productive capacities enabled by their alliances with their presses.

In sum, the new materialism does not replace the old, but leaves room for it while directing attention to a different register of human relations with the other-than-human world. This is not the same as adding spirit to matter, but rather is tracing the affect and effect of materiality. This perspective seems particularly appropriate to bring to the study of printers and presses, in that the person handling the things is a hand compositor, composing bodies of text into relation with other bodies to create more powerful bodies. The structural conditions of the printers’ labors are themselves outcomes of ongoing entanglements of people, machines, and nature. I hope to engage old and new materialisms to contribute to a politics of becoming, cultivating processes of materializing actants and interactants that can matter to an anarchist vision of a just, free and beautiful world. Anarchists are often dismissed by accusations of “impracticality” – people need top-down authority, skeptics scoff, they cannot organize themselves. How refreshing to find anarchists inhabiting self-organizing networks of emergent bodies and productive relations among actants. Collaborations of printers and presses enable the emergence of bodies and practices, not as finished products but as self-transforming processes with capacity to change.

1. This paper is a proto-chapter in a book on anarchist printers, which is itself an offshoot of my research on Emma Goldman and the anarchist movement; see *Emma Goldman: Political Thinking in the Streets* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2011), chapter two, on the role of printers in anarchist counterpublics. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. I move back and forth between the past and the present tense because, while I am looking at the past, I am sketching a process that continues into the present. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. My thanks to Duncan Dempster, Art Department, University of Hawai’i, for his explanation and demonstration of various presses (8/26/12). See also Burr, 51-52. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. My thanks to Peter Good for sharing his labor and his thoughts on printing (Nov 3-4, 2013, Norwich, England). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. A related question, which I am not addressing here, is the relation of the new materialism to genealogical or postmodern thinking. In brief, I see the new materialism as heavily indebted to the discursive turn in political theory; far from erasing bodies or losing politics in a free floating relativism, the turn to discourse opened up our thinking on how bodies can come to be and how they can mean. I also refuse to choose between new materialism and intersectionality; while the latter has often been grounded in identities, and the former contests those identities, they nonetheless can collaborate around nonhierarchical, processual understandings of power. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Perhaps he was being ironic. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For further discussion of the debates surrounding the “aristocracy of labor” arguments, see Duffy. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
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9. See, for example, *Kiss the Paper*, a film by Fiona Otway (fionaotway.com). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
10. An “em” is a unit of measurement for the productivity of compositors. It is named after the letter m, the widest in the alphabet. Pieces of metal the size of the letter m are “em quadrats”, and were used to compute wages. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)