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Humanities

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"Run with Whatever You Can Carry": Cross-Platform Materials and Methods in Performance Studies—Meets—Digital Humanities

T. L. Cowan

Remember to Surface

This essay is structured by my remix of "Instructions," a 1996 song by Veda Hille, a Vancouver-based songwriter, musician, and performer.¹ Each heading is an instruction from her song, which I returned to recently as I moved back to Canada after several years of living and working in the United States. It always struck me as a survival guide for the absurdity and brink-of-apocalypse quality of contemporary life. The absurdity (understatement) continues; today's apocalypse, as always, targets some more than others. And many people have already experienced the/an apocalypse many times over.

The song was a favorite of mine when I was an undergraduate dropout and emerging performer in Vancouver in the late 1990s. This was, significantly, also around the time that I got my first laptop computer and my first email account, so it also marks my belated entry into a digital existence. The perspective I bring to this *AQ* forum on methods is shaped by my cross-border, decentered understanding of performance studies and digital humanities, in the context of American/Americas studies more broadly. It is also shaped by what I see as the co-emergence and co-divergence of performance studies and digital humanities as newly articulated scholarly activities.

Endeavour to Dive

This essay reflects the thinking that I am doing as a scholar and practitioner who moves between performance studies and digital humanities, and digital media studies, all refracted through a kaleidoscopic critical lens that focuses and multiplies my understandings, priorities, and accountabilities toward work that is anti-colonial, trans-feminist and queer'ing, crip'ing, and anti-racist.

Indeed, like the people with whom I am in conversation, we do this work across these and other disciplines, using whatever field, space, or platform we can get our hands on within and beyond the academy. That's the first method.

Don't Let Them Shrivele on the Vine

The question of what methods the intradiscipline of performance studies brings to the intradiscipline of digital humanities bears considerable attention if we accept that these are two intradisciplines with distinct genealogies, protocols, methods, approaches, critical orientations, and commitments. But first let's trouble that a bit.

Don't Think of It as Reasonable, Think of It as Terrifying

I am reminded of Linda Tuhiwai Smith's clarification in *Decolonizing Methodologies* that "academic knowledges are organized around the idea of disciplines and fields of knowledge. These are deeply implicated in each other and share genealogical foundations in various classical and Enlightenment philosophies."² She notes that disciplines are "also isolated from each other through the maintenance of . . . disciplinary boundaries," and that they are "not simply . . . a way of organizing systems of knowledge, but also . . . a way of organizing people or bodies."³ Performance studies: you go in this building and study these things in these ways. Digital humanities: you go in this building and study these things in these ways. Both of you: demonstrate unique observations of new objects of study and analysis that dutifully learn from—but correct, expose, and reveal—the research and analysis of earlier scholars, and provide compelling evidence of your claims. Collect things and keep them (encrypted). Best if you discover something. Best if you are a pioneer on—or, better yet, break through—the frontier, wherever that is.

When You Hear a Mechanical Instrument, Think of a Child Shrieking

So, in any case, let's agree that we're talking about performance studies and digital humanities in the context of the in-bed-edness of university financial, social, and intellectual power with imperialism, genocide, mass enslavement, and settler colonialism in the United States and Canada and—in various manifestations—across the Americas. And in the context of the exploitation of workers within—and the poisoning of the land, water, and atmosphere that absorb the excesses of—the industries that fuel our scholarly disciplines and

the technological mobilities that we must keep up in order to keep going in them. As Safiya Noble writes, these are "hidden from view," beyond the scope of our interiorized analyses. What are needed, she writes, are intersectional, geopolitical "linkages between the labor and resources involved in the web and other global communications infrastructure projects that both facilitate, and are a source of, globalized extractive capitalism."⁴

Your Name Here

We're talking about the intellectual project of the humanities in the imperialist and colonial university that continues to understand and reward the individual as the "basic social unit"⁵ and basic intellectual unit, and continues to be organized around the accumulation of credit in the form of rank and resources, to the researcher and not the *researchees*. And, indeed, continues to insist on this distinction. We're also talking about the construction of academic disciplinary ladders on which we place ourselves and are placed: getting somewhere close to the top in terms of recognition and originality when it comes time for a tenure review, and getting and remaining extremely close to the top when it comes time for that last big promotion, that great distinction. And this for scholars who hold continuing academic positions.

Run with Whatever You Can Carry

The vast majority of scholars in *both* performance studies and digital humanities will continue to try to distinguish themselves in these fields while applying term-by-term to teach in various adjunct faculty positions, launching themselves at whichever courses in whatever disciplines they can find work in, getting paid a nonliving wage unless they manage to accumulate a teaching load massive enough that they make enough money to live, at which point we need to add to all disciplinary methods, the method of doing research in structurally impossible circumstances. There are teaching methods in each discipline, of course, but who's to say those trained in performance studies and digital humanities will even be teaching in these fields? More than likely, adjunctly appointed faculty are part of the teaching ranks filling in the interdisciplinary first-year curricula, or working at a writing center or an instructional technology center somewhere, while also running a few side hustles. That's the next method, which involves the great deal of interdiscipline it takes to make a paycheck.

Clean the Wound and Take Note of the Metal

What are we not talking about when we talk about disciplinary methods?

When Blinded, Construct Images around Unknown Sounds and Assume You Are Correct

In the mid-1990s many performance studies and theater journals published special issues on the topics of digitality, the internet, computing theater, embodiment, and documentation.⁶ The one to which I am particularly attached is the “Performing the Digital Body” special issue of *Women & Performance*, edited by Theresa Senft.⁷ It was issue 9.1. The previous issue, 8.2, also published in 1996, was “Queer Acts,” edited by José Muñoz.⁸ These two issues, framing performance studies through internet-aged feminist and queer-of-color critiques, strike me as a particularly potent reminder that these were the discussions to quite quickly shape the discipline, or at least to make a shape for themselves within the discipline. An attention to methods linked to epistemology informed the discussions throughout, with Senft noting, “When I use the methodology of performance to write about gender and technology, I often arrive at what I consider to be profound and humbling connections.”⁹ Anticipating the archival turn compelled by the increasing pressure put on our critical imaginations by digital technological affordances, Muñoz invites us to engage queerly with the archive, perceiving that “instead of being clearly available as visible evidence, queerness has instead existed as innuendo, gossip, fleeting moments, and performances that are meant to be interacted with by those within its epistemological sphere—while evaporating at the touch of those who would eliminate queer possibility.”¹⁰ It bears noting that Muñoz is, at least in part, responding to Donald Morton’s critical attack against “queer” identities and scholarship in his “Birth of the Cyberqueer,”¹¹ which links the “(techno)birth of the cyberqueer” to the historical “appearance in late capitalism of such notions as virtual realities, cyberpunk, cybersex, teletheory.”¹² Indeed, performance studies scholarship co-emerged with fears of a digitized, queer, feminist, post- and decolonial planet.

This is also around the same time that digital humanities emerged in its various earlier manifestations including humanities computing, which is what it continues to be called at the University of Alberta, where I encountered it in the early 2000s. For those of us who approached digital humanities via performance studies during this time, using born-digital media and digitally remediated archives of live performance materials, digital humanities was per-

haps always feminist and queer; and performance and performance studies was perhaps always media/ated. Indeed, thinking back to Susan Bennett's introductory remarks in *Theatre Journals*'s 1999 issue titled "Theatre and Technology," studying what Johannes Birringer called "Contemporary Technology/Performance," "gives us a strong sense of how performance boundaries and genres have become blurred with the effect of expanding what, in the broadest sense, we consider to be performance."¹³ It's not going out on a limb to say that the emergence of digital technologies was instrumental in the emergence of the study of performance as something that required a reframing, or a replatforming, beyond the theater, well off the stage. As performance studies grew through a rethinking of the physical and conceptual spaces in which performance occurs, it allowed practitioners and scholars to rather fluidly leak these practices and analyses into the study of human and more-than-human interaction in the space of digital platforms and other virtual-embodied locales and scenarios.¹⁴

Pick It Up and Put It in Your Pocket

On April 16, 2015, Jess Dobkin, a performance artist based in Toronto, staged a performance titled "How Many Performance Artists Does It Take to Change a Light Bulb (for Martha Wilson)."¹⁵ True to the joke, the performance's answer is, "One to change the light bulb and forty to document it." Throughout this four-hour event, the performance was documented by the over one hundred people in attendance with their media of choice: some recording video on cell phones, others live sketching, another through an improvised DJ set, others still through video cameras, mini-tape audio recording, stenography machine, instant Polaroid and other film-based photography, live journaling, live tweeting, perpetual Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat posts. The event itself had been advertised through word-of-mouth and a Facebook event listing as well as a listing in the Images Festival program. This interactive performance thematized the transmedial and perpetually remediated nature of every "live" event or performance, and made clear that a live performance is also a media event.

While performance studies has had its debates about the condition of liveness and the drama of documentation, I think Sarah Bay-Cheng's analysis brings us to the current moment rather well: "The project of digital historiography will be to actively attend to the processes by which a performance constitutes, mediates, and is mediated by networks of digital exchange and to trace our own engagement within those networks. It is in these digital, transitory exchanges that the art, artist, and documentation will be present, and we will too."¹⁶ The

digital humanities project, then, within performance studies, or vice versa, is to think not simply of the drag-and-drop method of documentation and re-platformization, but what I have come to call transmedial drag,¹⁷ a method of study that rigorously engages with the context and the conditions of transfer of materials, ideas, and networks across bodies and platforms.

To All Peaks Carry Water

In closing, I offer Jill Dolan's remix of David Román's "critical generosity," a method that I think performance studies, specifically feminist and queer-of-color performance studies, has brought to the scholarly field. That is, practicing a method in which "critical engagement becomes a strategy for dialogue, not just between the critic and the artist but also hopefully among a community of spectators and writers and arts makers who see themselves as part of a larger project of world making in which every production, every piece of art, *matters*."¹⁸ While certainly I want to focus on, and work to transform, the conditions of local and global deresourcing on which most scholarship in the West and global North is founded, I also believe that the world-making project that Dolan embraces here necessarily also involves caring for the world-making projects that are working for this transformation on stages, streets, screens, and in the very line of code that brings you the shape and size of these words.

Notes

I want to acknowledge that this essay is an echo of conversations with many comrades, collaborators, and influencers. And I want to thank Veda Hille for allowing me to remix her song.

1. This title and the headings throughout this piece are borrowed with permission from Veda Hille's song "Instructions," *Spine*, 1996, compact disc.
2. Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 2nd ed. (London: Zed Books, 2012), 68.
3. *Ibid.*, 70–71.
4. Safiya Umoja Noble, "A Future for Intersectional Black Feminist Technology Studies," *S&F Online* 13.3–14.1 (2016), sfonline.barnard.edu/traversing-technologies/safiya-umoja-noble-a-future-for-intersectional-black-feminist-technology-studies/.
5. Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 51.
6. Other special issues of note were the *Canadian Theatre Review's* "Computing Theatre" 81 (1994), edited by Jill Tomasson Goodwin, and *Theatre Journals's* "Theatre and Technology" 51.4 (1999), edited by Susan Bennett. Hundreds of special issues, monographs and articles have been published, and conference panel and presentations staged, on these questions in the decades since, and journals continue to revisit them, marking their return and revision as digital media and technologies "become a mode of thought, absorbed, normalized." See Jennifer Parker-Starbuck's introduction to *Theatre Journals's* "Digital Issues" 68.3 (2016): xi.
7. Theresa M. Senft, "Introduction: Performing the Digital Body—a Ghost Story," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 91 (1996): 9–33.

8. José Esteban Muñoz, "Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 8.2 (1996): 5–16.
9. Senft, "Introduction," 13.
10. Muñoz, "Ephemera as Evidence," 6.
11. Donald Morton, "Birth of the Cyberqueer," *PMLA* 110.3 (1995): 369–81.
12. Ibid., 369. Jasmine Rault and I elaborate this connection in a forthcoming essay, "Onlining Queer Acts: Digital Research Ethics & Caring for Risky Archives," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 28.2 (2018).
13. Susan Bennett, "Comment," *Theatre Journal* 51.4 (1999).
14. Here I am thinking with Diana Taylor, whose transformative book *The Archive and the Repertoire* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003) helped shift performance studies not only into embodied knowledges but also across borders in the Americas, and whose Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics in the Americas continues to do this work.
15. Jess Dobkin, "How Many Performance Artists Does It Take to Change a Light Bulb (for Martha Wilson)," April 16, 2015, www.jessdobkin.com/jd_work/how-many-performance-artists/.
16. Sarah Bay-Cheng, "Theater Is Media: Some Principles for a Digital Historiography of Performance," *Theater* 42.2 (2012): 27–41.
17. T. L. Cowan, "The Internet of Bawdies: Transmedial Drag and the Onlining of Trans- Feminist and Queer Performance Archives, a Workshop Essay," *First Monday*, July 2018.
18. Jill Dolan, "Critical Generosity," *Public* (2012), public.imagingamerica.org/blog/article/critical-generosity-2/.