Mimicry or Invention?

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The conspicuous presence of many people with University of Virginia connections at a conference focused on the intersection of rare books and digital mediations is hardly coincidental. The institutional situation at Virginia in the 1990s and 2000s was perfectly suited to foster the confluence of traditional bibliographical studies and critical textual editing with digital humanities as it began to take shape. Then, as now, much of this activity happened in and around the library, and for good reasons. We have subsequently dispersed, but the members of that community continue to work with the combination of technical, theoretical, textual, and historical interests particularly suited to thinking about the future of books.

Virginia's community did not only embody a particular set of technological and intellectual interests. It also had a shared set of values. As the events at the University (removal of the president by a coup driven by corporate managers and their ilk) unfolded this week, serving as a counterpoint to the activities at the conference, those values were very much in my mind.[i] Foremost among them, the belief that public education, at the elite level, serves a substantive social purpose. Everything I value is at risk of being devalued in these times, and never has my sense been stronger than it is now that what I care about—historical understanding,

reflective thought, critical engagement with humanistic values–is endangered. These are perilous times and we need to think beyond what we have become familiar with as our institutional practices if we are to survive. We need to think beyond traditional pedagogy and scholarship, and towards a model of cultural production for a broader common, public, good. Time to move beyond "my" work and "my project" to an engagement in "our" work, with a broader horizon and higher ambition.

I'll address the future of the book by asking several questions: How did the remediation of the analogue codex into digital form change our understanding of what a book is? What will the design of books in electronic environments be like? How can we use electronic platforms to study books? And might we imagine a new form of "textbook" for the future that takes advantage of the affordances of computational media, networked repositories, and interpretative layers in order to support the work of a broad community of scholars, students, and public in a model of participatory pedagogy?

To begin, how did the encounter with digital media change our understanding of what a book is? We think we know what a book is—a finite object, bound and finished, static and semi-permanent with recognizable physical and material features. First generation eletronic books tried to emulate the most familiar and conspicuous material features, as if making a fake page drape would comfort those readers feeling a loss of tactile pleasure in a new flat-screen environment. Headers, footers, page numbers and other graphic conventions got imitated immediately, without any particular sense of how these features had come into

being or what purpose they serve in an analogue environment. But in their basic design, eBooks, Kindles, electronic readers of all kinds, began their cultural life with the belief that they were delivering streams of content, undifferentiated and un-designed in a continuous scroll or chunked to display as "page" units.

But a book is not a static object, and its fixity is an illusion. As the fields of analytic and descriptive bibliography, as well as those of critical editing and textual scholarship, make evident in their own discipline-specific ways, a book is a snapshot of a continuous stream of intellectual activity. Texts are fluid. They change from edition to edition, from copy to copy, and only temporarily fix the state of a conversation among many individuals and works across time. The graphic elements of marginalia, commentary, footnotes and endnotes, express what I once heard poet Steve McCaffery call the "centripetal" and "centrifugal" forces of textual production. The internal warp and woof of textual relations intertwined with the outward strains of association, networked trails of reference leading to the discourse field whose connections extend in an infinite regress. A book is a temporary intervention in that living field.

In addition, every book contains the traces of its making, its production history is inscribed in the physical artifact. Collation formulae, corrections, errata, the choices of materials and methods of production are all indexical signs. Each leads into the lifecycle study of a work and its history. The production values embody decisions about other values—of labor and materials, of paper, binding, and printing costs, ecological costs, systems of exchange in global markets in which the raw materials are processed, shipped, reworked, and brought to market. Like any

other cultural product, books perform a symbolic display through their material existence, parading the conspicuous markers of class and taste. As surely as any other aesthetic object, books are according meaning and value in the shifting frameworks of social change, their identity re-imagined anew in each context, community, and generation. Not only does every reading of a work produce it anew, but each reinvention re-codifies the image of a book as an icon—whether mythic or banal, a treasure or an ordinary object of daily use.

And just as the material and textual codes of books are read according to their various formula and conventions, so the imitation of print formats in electronic form has quickly come to be ruled by fixed and legible rules of composition. The understanding of what belongs in a header, a navigation bar, a sidebar, a pop-up window, a banner, and so on is now so well-developed that a design guide to web-page composition carries instructions on how to allocate different types of content to different positions. Just as surely as the Talmud is encoded to communicate status of each scholar within the community of readers, with Rashi always framing the text in the privileged position in the upper right corner of each page, so web conventions define their own hierarchies of authority even as social media enable a real-time conversation to emerge.

Therefore, mimicry only gets us so far in the design of web-based texts. The migration of analogue materials into facsimiles by way of scanners or digital cameras leads to certain expectations for access to complete books in surrogate form. We know digital images are simulacra, and treating page images as representations, mediated in the most flat-footed way, avoids the kitsch suggestions

that special effects bring into play. But the advantages of computational processes offer their own compensations and benefits. Some of these are rooted in analogue explorations enabled by digital platforms—aggregation and comparison of materials that are geographically separated. The many versions and copies of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* quartos, for instance, can be layered, contrasted, studied in great detail on the platform built at MITH (Maryland Institute for Technology in the Humanities).[ii] The study of the lifecycle of the production of a literary work, like that of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* in its many manuscript and print iterations, though bound to analogue materials and history, becomes possible in unprecedented ways in a digital environment.[iii] Other instances can be cited, but complementing these extensions of analysis of analogue materials we have a suite of analytic tools grounded in computational capacities to consider as well. More on this momentarily. For now we can merely imagine the ways that linked open-data and metadata will allow us to fulfill the dreams of replete editing, tracking ideas across almost unimaginably complex migratory patterns of textual transmission.

But just as our understanding of a book is that it is a slice across complex systems, networks, histories and fields evolves, so our desires for a compositional platform evolves with it. The more we can imagine, the more we wish to do with the potential of digital writing spaces. Initial projects of design still take their cues from imitation, imagining ways to make the screen represent sidebars, tabbed sections, and flat page displays. But pull-down menus, the elastically collapsible and expandable potential of the screen, with its ability to change scale, resize text and image, open an infinite number of arrays and displays—these are all features of

screen display with capacity to be used compositionally. Meanwhile artists play with the theatrical potential of textual production: one made a digital installation that responded to a hand waved over a blank page, conjuring a text into being that changes with each subsequent gesture, another recorded ambient noise and made it into text, or used a video camera to survey the reader for the purpose of re-inscribing responses into the text, and others have worked with the potential of multimedia. *The God Project* was promoted with all the fanfare and hyperbolic rhetoric owed to the hubristic aspirations of its title, as a work that was billed as the "first step into the multi-media future of the book" by its publicist team.[iv] Of course, the online newspapers embed multi-media in their pages every day—video, audio, interactive graphics—so incorporating such materials into a novel is hardly a technical or conceptual feat. More adventurous experiments, such as that undertaken by poet Amaranth Borsuk and her collaborator Brad Bouse, imagine writing beyond the book—whether through the holographic image conjured by a file linked to a QR code in a bound codex or situated in a physical environment.[v] The text of Borsuk and Bouse's book exists online, as a file that is only visible inside the pages when the open spread is held up to the camera eye in the computer. Where, then, is the text spatially located?

Other design experiments involve the use of a database structure as a primary site of textual production. Structured data allows for modular and combinatoric approaches to texts at the point of their inception, and in combination with faceted browsing and searching, permits the selective display of contents according to specific themes, terms, or any other structured field. In my

experimental memoire, *All*, the materials can be sorted to produce various Tables of Contents, for instance, arranging the "book" display by date, location, period, genre, or any other variable. In a proof of concept project, a Canadian designer created a "Table of Context" application that allows a rich collection of references, facts about persons, publications, biographical and bibliographical information, or any other associated data to be created on the fly by a reader or user dragging search results or terms from a sidebar to a menu. These approaches go beyond mimicry to innovation, making use of familiar format features to support the kind of research and reading practice specific to digital environments.

New applications for spatialized, diagrammatic, writing practices allow authors to preserve alternatives, branchings, multiple possibilities of a text even at the very level of a sentence. All those impulses to create variations in a thought, to follow the suggestive possibilities that form in one's mind as one writes, are supported by programs like Mind Map. Unaesthetic and unappealing as they may be, hatched in the corporate culture world oriented towards whiteboard presentations, they nonetheless are a contribution to the inventory of new tools for presenting thought forms differently than in print formats. Closer to manuscript, with its variable scales, capacity for interlineation and other flexible format features, the electronic screen manipulation will expand in imaginative ways ahead. The multiplicity of voices, and of points of view, that will make a definitive shift from universe to multiverse is on the horizon, changing the dynamics of power long coded into the structured space of textual materials. When a "speaker" can take a

central position and organize the discourse from their point of view, then the game of writing changes.

Methods of display that take better advantage of the screen's dimensional illusion are also ahead. David Small's now historic 1999 *Talmud Project* was an early effort at making better use of layered, palimpsestic viewing techniques and three-dimensional navigation.[vi] Creating conventions that work semantically as well as technically and allow a legible arrangement and organization of text is a challenge. Jeffrey Shaw's 1998 installation, *The Legible City,* also experimented with an immersive visualization in a textual landscape through which a reader/viewer pedaled on a bicycle.[vii] But novelty effects are just that, not stable platforms for production. Scholars may embrace the possibility of multi-faceted arguments, infinite footnotes, networked references, and discourse fields, but to study the history of the book or any other cultural artifact with the kinds of replete arguments accompanied by thick evidence that we know the web can sustain requires a combination of standardization and conventionalization that extends what we know through innovations that have their own solid rhetorical force. Neither mimicry nor special effects are sufficient. We need to think about the ways the very specific activities of research and study, publication and exhibition, preservation of knowledge and interpretative activity can be combined. How to best take advantage of the properties of networked environments to create a very different image of a book, perhaps even a "textbook," in this extensible field?

Let me bring my argument back into focus and pursue the idea of the future of the book in its relation to the future of the study of the book, book history, and

publication. One of the curious facts of book history is that when we teach the history of these complex artifacts, we tend to rely on narratives and critical analysis. The major reference works in our field, whether we gesture towards classic texts by Douglas McMurtrie, David Diringer, or more recent anthologies edited by Simon Eliot, Michael Suarez, or others, are dominated by narrative accounts of publication events, techniques, print history, cultural activities and change. And yet, when we go into a special collections library or reading room, our approach changes radically. We use an artifactual approach of the sort that prevails at Rare Book School. There we have the object in front of us. We tend to teach from it, about it, focus on it, weaving whatever cultural and social histories pertain around the object in front of us. We can't put an artifact into a printed book, pay attention to its details, its formal and material properties, its spatial distribution of features. It's not possible, except in rare circumstances in which a print facsimile is produced, to insert a book into a text that takes that work as it object of study. But in an electronic environment, that is fully possible. Even essential.

This brings us back to the notion of mimicry vs. innovation. In creating *Artistsbooksonline*, for instance, I made the decision that the only way to present artists' books was to show them in their entirety. Every page of every book had to be scanned and/or photographed and had to be accessible for reading and research. Otherwise, the images were useless. They told you nothing. Being able to see every page, preferably every spread, and to zoom in, look at high resolution images of details, move through the work, and read enhanced metadata that describes the production process, rationale, and critical dimensions of a book was essential to

understanding. Getting such metadata produced was another project, and few artists were willing to make the effort to contribute to their own book's descriptions. So facing up to the realities of collaboration and expectations is also essential in designing participatory projects.

But what do we want in an online book, for instance, a textbook that might serve for the study of books in all their many dimensions? Kitsch mimicry vanishes quickly under the pressures of real design challenges. Because when we start to study a book—for instance the wonderfully inventive *Petit Journal des Refusées* produced by San Francisco Bohemian wit, Gelett Burgess, in 1896–we realize that we want to resituate it among many different works. Burgess's trapezoidal book, printed on wall paper from letterpress and cuts, begs for contrast with any number of graphic items—the illustrations of Aubrey Beardsley, of Arthur Rackham, and of Japanese woodblocks. This graphical dimension is just one of many, and we find ourselves wanting to complement it along each line of inquiry—textual, social, cultural, material—conjuring an array of documentary evidence within and against which to read the specificity of the Burgess. We can easily imagine, in this era of online repositories, that we could bring any number of rich collections into view to make our arguments, to bring the simulacral versions of primary documents into a screen space for contrast and comparison. Likewise, we might want to have access to the manuscripts, notes, and other witnesses of a work's production, or track its reception history in correspondence, letters, or reviews. Each line of inquiry is an axis along which to array materials relevant to the inquiry. As in an analogue or printed publication, we want to point to a reference field. The difference is that in a

networked environment, these references can be called forth immediately, in their complete (albeit virtual) form. Likewise, the socially mediated spaces of debate, once sentenced to secondary status in the place of footnotes or marginalia, can be activated in real time and broadly accessed to create lively exchange of opinion about a work. Even if we were to be able to sit in an archive or special collections reading room of an institution that housed all of these materials, we would not be able to handle them with this kind of flexibility, manipulating and moving them into relations with each other.

In addition, as we work electronically, we face issues of scale. The number of documents and archives we can access, the amount of data and metadata we can use, are all daunting. For purposes of searching, aggregating, and analyzing, we can take advantage of those capacities for which computational techniques are best suited. The many ways we can process structured and unstructured data are becoming codified. Graphical displays of representations of large numbers of surrogates, as in the Cultural Analytics project, or in one of the many applications developed by the Jigsaw Project at Georgia Tech, make patterns immediately visible.[viii] A change in paper stock, or style, or color printing, pops out even when the number of items on display is well into the hundreds. Networking analysis, topic maps, tree diagrams, analysis of word frequency and proximity—all provide views into data, processing texts at a scale that is simply impossible for human beings. Creating legible displays in which the graphical features communicate meaningful semantic values, not just special effects, presents another challenge. We have other skills, and gifts, in particular, a capacity for judgment. Combining the human skills

and the computational ones optimizes the ability to create associations, trails of reference, points of departure for more research. Where are the patterns? And the anomalies? The outliers? The norms? Distant reading, as the analysis of large scale historical patterns across textual corpora is known, has its many uses, one of which is to signal places to begin close reading of specific works. For, in the end, we do want to come back to acts of reading and understanding, to the tasks of interpretation central to our work.

In such a networked environment, then, what is a book? A book is what it always was, a snapshot, a momentary slice across a stream of living activity and debate, or of traditions of expression and form. A book, any book, is always an argument for what a book can and should be now in relation to other books and arguments. But increasingly, it will be a momentarily configured interface, created by a call that organizes and structures an interpretative argument across a corpus of material. A book will be a massively networked portal, a way into a thick field of references organized along lines of inquiry in which primary source materials, secondary interpretations, witnesses and evidence, are all available, incorporated made accessible for use.

In imagining a "textbook" for the study of the history of the book, therefore, I'm envisioning a collaborative, integrated platform into which the collective expertise of a broad community might be placed. The specialized knowledge in this domain, much of it in the minds of experienced scholars and teachers, could be downloaded in chunks, modules, small and larger units of annotation, discussion, or debate. A work would always be understood within a network of other works, but

many scholars would have a platform on which to weave our elaborate schemes of study and analysis.

My current work, conceived with the larger rubric of the Museum of Writing, a work in progress based on the analogue collection of Alan Cole and meant to create a digital museum that might eventually be part of a larger entity, a Museum of Communication, includes a design for the MoW that envisions long and short form scholarship, enhanced metadata, collection development and exhibit creation for a wide range of constituencies from interested public and schoolchildren to scholars and teachers. But it also includes a prototype developed this quarter at UCLA (ten weeks, start to finish) to test the viability of a model of participatory pedagogy. Focused on the alphabet books in the Children's Book Collection, the project was designed to structure research and writing in a way that resulted in an online exhibit and resource. In ten weeks the students had to learn about the objects and become informed about key themes (literacy, childhood, printing and publication history, cultural iconography) and write tightly structured units. (As Peter Stallybrass suggested in a *PMLA* article from 2007, don't assign the students the job of *thinking,* instead, give them *tasks*, things to do from which they can learn.)[ix] The result was highly successful—we created a resource that no individual would have been able to produce in the same amount of time. As a way to showcase the books, make them accessible outside Special Collections, provide interpretative insights and frameworks, it was remarkable.

The challenge now is to create a platform on which vetted, authoritative, well-structured intellectual content can be aggregated, not as a central repository,

but as a networked environment of materials, commentary, and pedagogical as well as research possibilities. I can imagine the staff, faculty, and students of Rare Book School providing the foundation for such a resource, creating a platform that would become ever more nuanced, granular, and replete over time. Such a resource would allow institutions with small but focused collections of unique materials to contextualize them for teaching and research. It would also allow for spotlight collections to become visible, for resources to be aggregated in search environments that are domain specific and authoritative. And it would allow researchers with an interest in weaving complex arguments and connections to do so into perpetuity.

My own long-range project takes its point of departure from the amazing compendium published in 1799 by Edmund Fry, *Pantographia*, a work purporting to be the presentation of all known alphabets and fonts. A punchcutter and type-founder, as well as printer and scholar, Fry presented his 300 + fonts with all of their sources cited and attributions clearly stated. As a picture of knowledge about the alphabet, its historiography, but also, a conception of writing at a crucial moment on the advent of archaeological methods, the work is a nearly inexhaustible source of information. Tracking its sources, resituating its understandings within models of history, temporality, cultural diffusion and writing technologies would be one study within a larger project in which we grapple with the cultural imaginary of alphabets and scripts as part of media theory and archaeology. To do this properly, as we can now, is to engage with the new formations of "book" in the extensible field of digital environments, portals, platforms, computational analytics, faceted browsing and search, and multiple views and displays. Much is ahead. Where better

than in the history of books and its study could we look to reinvent the study of the book in a reimagined version of the object at its center? A book will be a call, a framework that configures an argument or presentation around an object, theme, topic, or idea from a multifaceted repository of primary and secondary materials in a web of relations and connections to each other. And to make a project that is not my project, or the project of any other single person or institutional unit, but a project of a community of practitioners and students that embodies a model of participatory pedagogy that also serves a public interest.

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[ix] Peter Stallybrass, "Against Thinking," *PMLA* 122, no. 5: 1580-1587. 2.1