

Alan Liu, "Bridging From the Textual to the Digital"

Panel on "Literary Studies in Cyberspace: Transforming Texts, Contexts, and Criticism"

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This is a session, as you know, on "Literary Studies in Cyberspace: Transforming Texts, Contexts, and Criticism." Each of the speakers in this panel has done important work in developing scholarly digital resources or programs related to literature, and each, I think, has reflected well tonight on what such work entails upon our evolving understanding of the textual artifact and the physical, sociological, epistemological, psychological, interpretive, and institutional apparatuses built to house such artifacts. Simultaneously, however, each speaker has also been aware of the "transformative" power of the digital to morph the textual artifact in ways that push the very envelop of textuality. Indeed, the primary insight I take away from the papers tonight is the shared intuition, which I also endorse, of a richly productive yet also possibly fraught dialectic between the textual and (until better a term suggests itself) trans-textual parameters of the digital.

Thus, to take up just one instance in detail, Stephanie Browner discusses Stephen Railton's Web site on Uncle Tom's Cabin and American Culture as an archive of texts and other materials that, however decentralized in interpretive argument, can nevertheless still be processed according to well-established, if adapted, textual models. One paragraph in particular in Browner's paper is both representative and individually rich enough to merit quoting a length:

Railton's site also brings to the fore another feature of digital scholarship—a sense in digital environments that **arranging and rearranging materials** is easy and thus a sense that information can with relative ease in a digital environment be **shaped, scaled and**

negotiated in different ways. In fact, although Railton may put Stowe's novel at the center of his front page, there need not be a center to the archive. The user can decide what is important and what is recondite. Indeed, the interactive capabilities of digital archives and the ready access to materials in other archives makes the digital desktop not so much a readerly as a writerly environment.

What hoves into view here in Browner's shrewd description of Railton's archive is a new kind of textual environment that can be "arranged and rearranged," "shaped, scaled and negotiated," and otherwise processed in ways excessive of older notions of authorial or editorial control. This is transformative indeed. Perhaps the best single sentence to look at to assess the trans-textualism that Browner intuits is this one: "In fact," she says, "although Railton may put Stowe's novel at the center of his front page, there need not be a center to this archive." What Railton's site displays, in other words, is in essence a page without a center, which is to say not a page in the strict sense at all or even a series of pages. Rather, just as the term "Web page" now blurs in reference between individual Web pages and whole Web sites with multiple pages and links to external servers, so Railton's site is paradigmatically a set of "pages" that cannot be read qua pages but only from the first—rather than secondarily—as an "archive." In short, the inflation of the term "archive" today to address a disparate multitude of online resources is in itself a symptom of the radical transformation of the notion of "text." The term "archive" is what deconstruction used to call a "catachresis," a forced or abused figure borrowed over from something else to name another thing that in fact has no proper name of its own.

Yet if Browner is thus keenly aware of the trans-textual nature of Railton's decentered archive, she is also quick—exemplifying the other, textual pole of the dialectic—to recapture

control over the archive in the name if not of the author than of the reader, who henceforth—as echoed so often in early theory of hypertext—will be the faux author. "The user can decide what is important and recondite," Browner says. Foreclosed, therefore, is the unsettling possibility that there might not be any person in control at all, and that the very notion of agency, control, or decision is what needs to be rethought in light of theories of collective, networked, or systems behavior (topics I return to later). In any case, Browner concludes a few sentences later with a phrase that several other panelists also recite with strange satisfaction. Railton's site, she says, can "of course . . . still be printed out." It can still be domesticated, that is, within known textual experience—even though, she then immediately adds in a telling parenthesis, "well, the audio and movie clips cannot."

Since time is short, I cannot closely read equivalent representative or rich passages from the other talks. But the same dialectical tension between the textual and trans-textual, I think, can there be observed. John Unsworth's paper thus describes a continuum running from digitized print or analog works to "born-digital" materials and tools, some of the latter of which (for example, XML-based algorithmic processing of texts or the "spatial modeling of textual features") stretch our notion of textuality to the point where the term begins to strain credibility and feel catachrestic—suggesting that perhaps it is not a continuum so much as "dis-continuum" between text and new media that John is describing. Similarly, Jack Lynch's paper is all about spanning the gap between past interface "structures" that present texts within well-ordered schemas of authority and interpretation and the interface of the Web that—by comparison with the hierarchical structure of Gopher in the early 1990s, for example—is not easily spoken of as structured or authoritative at all. And Martha Smith observes in the same vein that "humanities computing" with its emphasis on textual materials must now encompass new, trans-textual

modes of "access, multimedia study objects, collaboration, and self-consciousness" that have the potential to reach beyond narrow academic circles to the "millions" accustomed to the "screen culture" of "television, movies, and the World Wide Web."

Clearly, as glimpsed in our papers tonight, the span of the dialectic between the "textual" and what I have termed "trans-textual" is enough to occupy at least a generation of productive, innovative humanities scholars like the people in this room. There are huge, exciting, and daunting challenges—at once theoretical and practical—to be met in building the bridge from the textual to the digital. Indeed, to heed Jerome McGann's recent jeremiad in his essay on "Literary Scholarship in the Digital Future" (Chronicle of Higher Education, Dec. 13, 2002), there may well be more work to do in spanning the textual and digital than our academic institutions are currently prepared to staff in this generation or the next. At his bridge-building or pontifical best, McGann writes:

Let me make a forecast: In the next 50 years, the entirety of our inherited archive of cultural works will have to be re-edited within a network of digital storage, access, and dissemination. This system, which is already under development, is transnational and transcultural. Let's say that prophecy is true. Now ask yourself these questions: who will be carrying out this work? Who will do it? Who should do it?" (pp. B7-B8)

Our humanities disciplines, McGann asserts as his main point, are simply not valuing textual-editing enough to train an adequate cadre of scholars practiced in the latest methods, technologies, and theory of textual-editing.

But I wish to bring my own pontification tonight to bear on a somewhat different focus than the scholarly span between the textual and the digital. If I had one criticism to offer about

the papers we have heard—and, to be fair, not the papers in themselves but the very constraints of the question of textual studies in the digital age—it would be that the full dimensions of the question have yet to be delineated. I don't think that we in the humanities—you and I—have yet thought fully enough about what I termed the "trans-textual," that aspect of new or digital media that has the potential to transform our understanding of textuality so utterly that it is not just the form, use, or theory of texts (even abetted by the concept of the neo-archive) but the very status of texts in competition with other paradigms and media that is at stake. Before we can appropriately measure the span of the bridge we are building and draw up plans, in other words, we need a better idea of the nature and distance of the further shore. In this regard, discussions of the problem that start within the paradigm of textuality and then, no matter how far outwards they venture, still gravitate back as if a priori to textuality (or at least to the need for textuality)—seem to me to be today too strategically limited. I, too, share a commitment to the continued vitality of texts, but I would suggest that the necessity for texts and for the whole set of apparatuses designed to facilitate the creation, distribution, reception, and processing of knowledge and experience as channeled through texts cannot simply be assumed if we textualists are to contribute to its vitality.

As humanities scholars interested in digital media today—which I personally believe is tantamount to saying in the very survival of humanities knowledge today—I think we have to fight for, even as we adapt, the very notion of "text." Martha Smith's paper is very apropos with its look outward to the "millions" of screen rather than print junkies. Let's face it: our students today learn much of what they know about life, the world, their peers, and themselves not through texts but through other channels of knowledge that are valued in popular culture as well as corporate culture in a manner that the academy—outside a few film, media studies, and new

media studies departments—cannot yet properly think about but can only dis. The entire ecology of media and knowledge is now different than when literacy lorded over orality on the basis of its monopoly on power and cultural capital. To define the appropriate ecological niche for textuality today, I think we need to recognize more fully the power of the trans-textual in order therefore to mark out—interpretively, institutionally, politically, and otherwise—the surviving and adaptive value of "texts" more clearly. For make no doubt: texts continue to be valuable. But what that value is, and who gets to define it in a world where reading "literature" is no longer as necessary as reading or authoring a spreadsheet, report, or Web page, is up for grabs. This means, above all, that humanities scholars with a vested interest in texts (especially print texts and archives) need to broaden the reach of their span of inquiry so that the full range of what I have called the trans-textual is given its due.

In particular, I would answer the textualist prophecy of McGann with another prophecy focused exogamously on the outer horizons where "text" becomes something else. It's time to name that something else, for which the term "trans-textual" has so far merely served as a cover in lieu of yet another catachresis. Here is a prophecy of the major issues I think textualists will need to face in the next twenty years as they redefine the nature of texts in a digital world. Each issue names an aspect of trans-textual experience (only some of which, alas, I will here be able to accompany with a demo):

- multimedia and time-based media
- interactive media (e.g., games)
- immersive media (e.g., VR)
- collaborative media
- algorithmic media
- networked media
- code-conscious writing
- archive squared