Footnotes, Endnotes, and HTML5: Blogging and the Future of Literary Criticism
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Thanks to the ACCUTE organizers, my fellow panelists, and those of you who made it out to this early morning panel today. As is the custom where I live, I'd like to acknowledge that we are gathered today on the traditional Treaty 7 territory of the Blackfoot, Tsuu T'ina (Soot Tenna), and the Stoney Peoples.

Literary scholars were among the earliest adopters of digital dissemination of research; indeed, the field of Digital Humanities is populated heavily by people with PhDs in English, especially from areas like Renaissance literature where a large body of material is available in open source formats. As the Digital Humanities have expanded and other fields have embraced digital culture for dissemination of information, new issues around publishing and peer review, including the utility of open access journals, have emerged. These venues for publication and conversation offer a democratic approach to scholarly debate, often engaging academics and non-academics alike, and demanding acknowledgement of fan communities and their unique approaches to the close readings of texts. This intersection can frustrate traditionally-trained academics, but it can also enrich academic conversations and help connect the scholarship of literature to the real-world experiences of readers.

Here's a confession to start this talk: this paper has been rejected without comment from the ACCUTE Congress CFP every year for at least the last three years. I don't give up easily (apparently) or perhaps have a limited number of ideas, so I keep resubmitting it. This year, obviously, it was accepted. I've been thinking a lot about why. Possibly I just got an exceptionally generous reviewer — if so, thank you — but possibly also more of us are now wrestling with the idea of being public about our research or engaging more frequently in on-line spaces and we're ready to talk about it. I certainly came to want to think about this subject more carefully and critically as a response to my own practice. I am heavily engaged in online literary

spaces from the popular to the academic. I blog at Book Riot, North America's most popular independent book site with over a million unique readers every month; I co-organize the scholarly blog Graphixia, which is an online space for scholarly, but not peer-reviewed, comics chatter; and I'm on the editorial board of the Comics Grid, an online, open-access, peer-reviewed journal of comics scholarship. In addition, I spend way too much time talking about the academy and literary scholarship on Twitter, and I also maintain a TinyLetter, titled This Week I Learned, which largely focuses on professional concerns.

So I'm on the internet. A lot. And while all of these spaces feel very natural for me to engage with, I am interested in the ways in which these spaces, many of which involve me working through my research process in very public ways, and all of which involve the dissemination of knowledge gained through academic practice, inform my process as a scholar. I am not, I should make clear, a digital humanist — but I am a humanities scholar who wants more of us involved in the digital. This paper 1/3 a review of the existing research and commentary on the practice of scholarly blogging, 1/3 an interrogation of the places I play on-line and places like them, and 1/3 some tentative notes towards a theory of the possibilities for the future of literary scholarship in the digital age. In 20 minutes. I should probably get on with it.

What the Scholars Say:

In her 2010 study of the role of blogging within the academy, Gill Kirkup asserts that "if the formal structure of academic value refuses to engage with blogs – and other media – then academics will struggle to engage as twenty-first century public intellectuals" (82-3). In recent years, more academics have accepted the opportunities and challenges that come with the development of an on-line identity as a public intellectual, perhaps due largely to what Jana L. Bouwma-Gearhart and James L. Bess term "the possibilities for new collaborative, real-time modes of information exchange that permit contributions from a vast number of potential

expert collaborators from around the world" (268).

In her qualitative study examining why people blog, Sara Kjellberg identifies three major motivations: the desire to share discoveries with other people in the field and initiate debate about them; the desire to write more creatively than some rigid disciplinary structures will allow for; and to feel connected to a community of scholarly practice. It's worth thinking about the value of all three of these components in an academic landscape that is increasingly precarious, de-centred, and "alt" — many scholars who are not privy to a home institution, for whatever reason, are able to continue their work as intellectuals because of scholarly blogging communities. It's also worth considering, as we begin to publicly discuss the problems with the scholarly publication model as it stands now — namely, money — and the problems with peer review as currently practiced — namely, replication over innovation — that scholarly blogs are places where academics reject these very systems in favour of open, messy dissemination.

Writing in 2012 in the *Journal of Victorian Culture* about the development of her own blog, "Novel Readings," Dalhousie's own Rohan Maitzen argues that "academic blogging can and should have an acknowledged place in the overall ecology of scholarship" (348), even if it's not the right choice for every academic or every project. (In his piece for Chronicle of Higher Education, Martin Weller echoes the idea that blogging may not be for everyone and shrugs off the anxieties of those who fear its imposition by noting, "A key aspect of the digital revolution is not the direct replacement of one form of scholarly activity with another, but rather the addition of alternatives to existing forms.") Maitzen celebrates the fact that blogging "restores immediacy to scholarly discussion, removes logistical roadblocks to knowledge dissemination, and up-ends the communication/validation hierarchy in favour of the open exchange of ideas" (352). The pleasures Maitzen outlines here are ones I have experienced myself — I know that far more people will read even a poorly trafficked blog post I produce for one of my platforms than will hear this talk or read one of my articles or book chapters, and the response to that intellectual

labour is immediate and can be made use of quickly. The blog is not the end of the academic output, then, but part of the process. We know from the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning that our students experience their most authentic learning when they must engage in their thought processes publicly and without a net. Why would we assume that is not true for ourselves, too? Heidi Estes puts it this way:

> Blogging allows me a space to think about things I do in my academic work, but in an atmosphere that is more personal and more casual. Sometimes it extends out of my academic work, sometimes it leads to it, sometimes it's a space in which I think explicitly about issues of identity raised in navigating professional commitments. I imagine the blog as the electronic equivalent of the front stoop of an apartment building, a place where the neighbors pause at the end of the day. Some will simply gesture hello, others will exchange a few words, some will sit down and have a serious conversation. Here and there, a passerby might pause to listen to and comment on the conversation, possibly changing its entire direction. Apparently, quite a few people visit my blog, give a nod, and move on. Some leave brief comments. And occasionally, a post leads to serious dialogue, and the resulting challenge to my ideas shapes my thinking in ways that enrich my academic work.

It is this notion of community for scholarship that, I suspect, is the most powerful. English departments are shrinking, and many of us are the only people who do what we do in our immediate physical surroundings. A good blog is like a conference you can check in on whenever you want.

There are mercenary reasons to think about Web 2.0 as a place to work and play too, however. A 2011 Journal of Medical Internet Research demonstrates that the frequency with which a journal article is Tweeted on the microblogging platform Twitter is a pretty reliable predictor of how frequently it will be cited. In study of scholarly blogs as a communication tool,

Carolyn Hack found that 82% of scholarly bloggers had been extended an invitation to publish a more formal academic work as a direct result of their blogging, and almost everyone had been asked to connect with a scholarly community in some way (as a reviewer, for example) (60). That has certainly been my experience. Being present as part of the academic conversation is a huge benefit to blogging, especially if you are an alt-academic or non-traditional scholar.

This work is even more urgent for marginalized voices in scholarship, as Liana Silva has argued:

> For minority scholars, such as myself, blogging is not just a bullet point on a CV; it is an intrinsic part of what my research is about: a commitment to making the struggles, achievements and contradictions of African Americans, Puerto Ricans or women visible to the broader population. I cannot afford silence. Blogging allows me a platform to talk about issues that may go unnoticed, or issues where the point of view of a person of colour or of a woman have been left in the cold. Because it happens. A lot.

Silva argues that blogging is an essential defence against movements seeking to limit identity or minority scholarships, because it allows scholars to communicate directly with communities that may be able to make practical use of the work and doesn't require the blessing of traditional academic gatekeepers. In other words, blogging can be a site of resistance.

But what I find most interesting in this, as in all things, is timing, especially for literary scholars. The explosion in academic blogging has emerged alongside the explosion in book blogging, creating a unique constellation of challenges for the literary academic who wants to engage in both popular and academic conversations about literature. I think this is a very good thing indeed, and I'm going to shift now to tell you why.

How These Spaces Act and Interact

There's one place where fan readers and academics have interacted on equal turf for decades, and that's SciFi-Fantasy conventions. On the convention floor, a PhD and publications are respected, but so to is encyclopedic and long-ranging knowledge of a text or series. Indeed, they are treated with equal weight and gravity, depending on the question being tackled. I have in the last few years been introduced to these spaces by a colleague who specializes in 60s hard SciFi, and as a comics scholar, I have found the experience of panelling at a con to be wildly valuable and intellectually challenging, because it forces me to support my claims to knowledge and acknowledge the limitations of my own body of work. I consider myself an expert on the cultural significance of *Alpha Flight*, but I can't quote every single issue chapter and verse. My expertise is different, and not superior, to the person who can. It's an important reminder of how people actually read and experience texts.

In a sense, that's what online academic spaces allow for, too. I'm a co-organzier at Graphixia, which we subtitle A Conversation about Comics. This community of ten scholars from Canada, England, Scotland, and France is structured to rotate through our contributors (with occasional guest contributors) with a new 500-1000 word post on an assigned topic each week; once we've all written to the topic, we identity a new one. My co-organizer Peter Wilkins always says that we must never underestimate the power of consistent, public expectation of our writing, no matter how small — and he's right. Work I've started at Graphixia has become conference papers, articles, book chapters, and now a book proposal. It's also a very public record of Things I Have Been Wrong About in Comics, which frankly has made me a more comfortable scholar in venues like this one (we should never underestimate the power of making intellectual mistakes in public when it comes to growing and expanding our ability to argue a point). But the real power is in the interaction between comics fans, comics scholars, and comics creators that happens as a result of the work I write for Graphixia — in the comments, sometimes, but more frequently on Twitter and other blogs. In these spaces, fan-

readers are often extremely useful because their encyclopedic knowledge of the form means that they can suggest connections within and across bodies of work that academics, with our relatively narrow specialties, might miss. For example, I once made an assertion that a comic character was introduced in her first issue, but a fan-reader contacted me to let me know the character's first introduction was actually in a crowd scene in a comics series I hadn't read; the connection ended up being a productive one for me in assessing the origin of the character and the creator's influences. I find the ability to tap into fan communities for this kind of content knowledge incredibly valuable. We read the texts differently, but if we engage with fan communities — many of whom are thirsty for the deep and challenging readings we can offer — their insights can often challenge or complicate our perspectives on texts.

But it's not just formally academic spaces where this mixing can occur in interesting and productive ways. Book Riot, for example, is absolutely a popular blog with no academic intention, and yet the stable of writers includes a large number of scholars who are either blogging alongside a traditional academic career, from sessional lecturers to professors of all ranks to deans, or are post-ac or alt-ac people who blog as a way to stay connected to a community of literary conversation. Indeed, the great joy of Book Riot is that it provides an equal footing for all careful and considered readers of text, regardless of background. What I have noticed in five years of writing for Book Riot is that the bookish internet — including sites like The Millions and BookSlut and more — is increasingly sophisticated and the readings offered there consistently challenging and impressive. And the activism happening in these spaces is also important to improving the landscape of literature and publishing: movements like We Need Diverse Books are places where we can connect with online communities to use our skills and expertise to help move the needle on issues of common concern.

Engagement with fan communities and writing for a broader audience are important to my own scholarship, but it's worth thinking about how internet spaces for academics can be a

site of possibility and opportunity for change. Online spaces are, by virtue of their studied impermanence and flexibility, places to consider experimenting with changes we'd like to see in more conservative aspects of the academy. The Comics Grid open-access peer-reviewed journal is, by virtue of its online status, a flexible and malleable entity. Though it is an established publication and though I only joined the Editorial Board months ago, for my first special collection — a forthcoming issue on David Bowie and Comics, please submit — I was able to change the past practice and demand explicitly inclusive language in the Call for Papers, something important to do in a field like comics studies that has had such a difficult time making space for diverse voices.

Where Do We Go From Here

Most of the existing work on scholarly blogging focuses on the role of blogging within the academy and arguing for its acceptance as a form of intellectual practice that has impact and should be considered quote-unquote valid. This is good, important work and I am fully in support of its aims. But where I think we need to head next in this conversation is to look at the possibilities in the on-line interactions between literature scholars and lay-readers. Here we can draw a lot on fandom theory and the experience of fan-scholars particularly in SciFi communities, but this is not something that more traditionally literary scholars have typically had to deal with. But there are thoughtful and engaged discussions going on all over the internet about works you may study, considering perspectives you've maybe never thought of. And a lot of it is bad. And a lot of it is wrong. But some of it is really, really great and worth your time and energy. And engaging with it in a meaningful way can offer your scholarship new life.

Scholarly blogging is a net positive for all the reasons the literature review I offered here suggests: it makes for effective dissemination, it builds academic community, it allows creativity in academic discourse. Those things are all powerful motivators to get academics into the

blogging game. But it's worth considering what else it offers us to open our I think the great benefit of open-access journals and scholarly blogging communities is that they are open spaces to which anyone can join or contribute. Lay-readers are able to access the community of scholarship that relates to their areas of interest and inquiry, and when space is available for their readings to overlap with more academic ones the result, I think, is beneficial to both: academics who make themselves understood to a lay-audience are better communicators and better able to be of service to their communities, and there's a worthwhile argument to be made that publicly funded scholarship should be widely available to interested readers regardless of background. The power of scholarly blogging and open access scholarship means that this engagement has never been easier, and the opportunities for cross-pollination have never been greater.

It's worth returning to Gill Kirkup's assertion from earlier in this paper: "if the formal structure of academic value refuses to engage with blogs – and other media – then academics will struggle to engage as twenty-first century public intellectuals." Embracing the opportunities for online interaction with fellow academics and the general public alike is, at its core, about recognizing where the commons of public discourse now exists and meeting the challenge of engaging with all comers. I was playing around with Google's autocomplete feature as I was finishing this paper, and it might interest you to know that if you type "academics are" into Google, it offers the following autocompletions: useless, arrogant, cool, snobs. If you try "english professors are," you get "are the worst," "aren't good for much," and "aren't in demand." I've been thinking about the way our relevance and our perceived worth are not well understood by the internet at large. But there are passionate readers and thinkers out there who we might do well to connect with and truly fulfill our potential, as Kirkup suggests, as twenty-first century public intellectuals.

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