A Series of Digital Research Discoveries

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Abstract

In this essay, I reflect on my use of online research databases throughout my career. Aware of the limits of research due to COVID-19, I share my main resources, including the William Blake Archive, A Celebration of Women Writers, and Readex. In addition to their function, I discuss the ethics of production and access to these databases. Who is creating them? Who can access and read them? How often are they updated? Are they teachable? I end by sharing advice on using these databases. This includes how to use databases as teaching resources for less-expensive, sometimes free, curriculum materials.

Modes of reading and researching literature have rapidly changed with the rise of the digital age, and many scholars, including me, no longer use books and other print documents as their main source of reading material. The interface of a digital display creates compound systems of research and engagement that distribute information multimodally. This essay reflects on the process of reading, writing, and researching through online databases and the discoveries, opportunities, and obstacles involved. I then share what I have learned through the process of researching in digital spaces and online databases, offering suggestions on how to improve the individual research process and how to participate in this burgeoning sector of digital humanities.

I began using scholarly electronic sources, specifically The William Blake Archive, during my undergraduate studies. This free site was created in 1996 and "was conceived as an international public resource that would provide unified access to major works of visual and literary art that are highly disparate, widely dispersed, and more and more often severely restricted as a result of their value, rarity, and extreme fragility."[1] The William Blake Archive continually "integrate[s] editions, catalogues, databases, and scholarly tools into one electronic archival

1 Morris Eaves, Robert Essick, and Joseph Viscomi, eds., "Archive at a Glance," The William Blake Archive, Library of Congress, accessed 1 April 2020, http://www.blakearchive.org/staticpage/archiveataglance.

resource."[2] Given my interest in Romantic visual culture and the ethics of representation, I have been able to freely access, download, teach, and cite this archive without needing to go to a physical repository or travel to specific sites in person. The virtual experience of reading Blake's illuminated books with appended bibliographical details and thorough descriptions of the content of each image has been a joy and privilege that previous generations lacked.

The first online research database I encountered in graduate school was A Celebration of Women Writers, UPenn Digital Library. I was having trouble finding open-access works by women writers, including Felicia Hemans and Nellie Bly. I remember reading the proclamation at the top of the site's "Local Editions by Author" page and feeling invited to read: "The goal of A Celebration of Women Writers is to comprehensively list online editions of works by women writers, and resources about women writers, which are freely readable online. The following digital editions have been created by the Celebration of Women Writers project. You are welcome to link [to] them."[3] I appreciated words like "freely" and "welcome" in a scholarly setting. The focus on out-of-copyright works by women and the fact that the editor, Mary Mark Ockerbloom, was a woman drew me in more. I was tired of reading an increasingly threadbare male-centred discourse and canon.

Today, due to remote working conditions during the COVID-19 crisis, online spaces for reading, researching, and teaching are more important than ever. They presage a new norm and necessity. My current research interests have shifted to global Anglophone literature across time and space, including print culture, so I regularly use Readex, COVE, and the Public Books Database to access online sources for research and teaching. The continually updated Public Books Database links to academic presses that have made "hundreds of their titles freely accessible online" in the wake of COVID-19.[4]

What does it mean for scholars that the world of online research databases, libraries, archives, and repositories is rapidly expanding? In many ways, the advancement of information technology can be a boon

2 In addition, a "growing number of contributors have given The William Blake Archive permission to include thousands of Blake's images and texts without fees" ("Archive at a Glance").

3 Mary Mark Ockerbloom, ed., "Local Editions by Author," A Celebration of Women Writers, accessed 1 April 2020, https://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/wr-mine.html.

4 Salvador I. Ayala Camarillo and Jess Engebretson, "Public Books Database," Public Books, accessed 3 April 2020, https://www.publicbooks.org/public-books-database/.

for an increase in accessible, multimodal, and culturally sustaining research spaces for non-traditional and contemporary scholarship practices. By "culturally sustaining," I am referring to the germinal work of Gloria Ladson-Billings and Django Paris in educational and cultural justice. Culturally sustaining pedagogy "seeks to perpetuate and foster—to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of education."[5] The proliferation of accessible online knowledge sites can also lead teachers and students to engage with new resources for less expensive, sometimes free, curriculum materials.

To sustain a practice or "culture," we must participate collectively in keeping it running. We must be cognizant of the intense, often invisible labour of creating and curating these online spaces, and we must attend to problems of accessibility. Digital and public humanities projects like the Public Books Database afford online and open access to global research communities, countering the spread of misinformation and increasing the number of informed viewpoints online. During this COVID-19 moment, ideas of the "human" and "culture" are under pressure to be restated and reconceived for a new era of physically remote survival and livelihood. While I do not want to lose the physical, material, face-to-face aspects of my work, I understand that multiple, hybrid interfaces of engagement with work, as well as with pleasure and play, will maintain the joy of the perpetually mutable, organic, and unpredictable processes of researching, reading, and learning.

5 Django Paris, "Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy: A Needed Change in Stance, Terminology, and Practice," *Educational Researcher* 41, no. 3 (2012): 93, https://doi.org/10.3102%2F0013189X12441244. Paris is building on the "culturally relevant pedagogy" model proposed by Gloria Ladson-Billings, who calls scholars to work to "produce students who can achieve academically, produce students who demonstrate cultural competence, and develop students who can both understand and critique the existing social order." Ladson-Billings, "Toward a Theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy," in *The Curriculum: Problems, Politics, and Possibilities*, 2nd ed., ed. Landon E. Beyer and Michael W. Apple (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998), 211.