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Our Capacious Caper: Exposing Print-Culture Bias in Departmental Tenure Documents

VALERIE LEE AND CYNTHIA L. SELFE

HOW IT ALL STARTED

Valerie Lee

AS A chair of one of the country's largest departments of English, I felt smug when the MLA Task Force on Evaluating Scholarship for Tenure and Promotion released its report. I methodically perused the list of twenty recommendations and noted that we followed all of them. Well, maybe we had not given much thought to number 13: "encourage scholars at all levels to write substantive book reviews"—but overall we were ahead of the game (*Report* 6). Indeed, I wondered what in the world the other departments were doing if not following rules such as these that made common academic sense. We sponsor workshops to keep the promotion process transparent; write annual review letters that detail all aspects of the candidate's profile; provide start-up funds, subventions, and so forth; hold sessions on preparing the tenure dossier; and remunerate external referees. We feel that quality judgments ultimately reside with the senior faculty members, never deferring that task to academic presses, and we never promote based on "collegiality." And then there is the task force recommendation that departments see as the heart of the document—"[t]he profession as a whole should develop a more capacious conception of scholarship by rethinking the dominance of the monograph" (5). Because we hire sociolinguists and folklorists, we did not have a problem with "establishing multiple pathways to tenure," if by multiple pathways one means a body of refereed journal articles in addition to the more traditional monograph (5). Over the years we have modified our strict mandate that scholarly monographs be published by only university presses to include other academic presses, such as Routledge and Palgrave Macmillan. As far as we were concerned, we had done about as much rethinking as necessary. If I had not known better, I would have thought that the task force used our

promotion and tenure guidelines as their template; the recommendations were largely what our College of Humanities and Office of Academic Affairs mandate for everyone. In fact, at Ohio State, units are required to revise their guidelines for promotion and tenure and pattern of administration every time a new chair is elected or appointed. These documents are also revisited when a chair begins a second term, which situation occasioned my unit's most recent set of revisions.

Believing my department to be doing well in promotion and tenure matters, I thought the most generous act that my department could perform for the welfare of all departments of English was to be a pioneer in the area of mapping out the territory of how to evaluate work done in various digital modes. Having prematurely decided that we met all the suggested task force guidelines, we decided to focus on recommendation number 4: "create procedures for evaluating these [new media] forms of scholarship" (5). After all, our department is digital friendly: we had recently hired six tenure-track faculty members and one full professor in digital media studies, and one of the tenure-track hires, Susan Delagrange, had won *Computers and Composition's* Hugh Burns Dissertation Award in 2006 for the best dissertation in computers and composition studies. We have an in-house digital media project that continues to

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attract internal and external grants, we run a digital media and composition summer institute, one of the department's service positions is director of digital media studies, and we recently revamped our large first-year writing program to stress digital composing. In this context, how difficult could it possibly be to write the blueprint on promotion and tenure guidelines for new media?

Drawing up the guidelines for evaluating new media proved trickier than I imagined. The process exposed that even a unit committed to digital media studies had deeply seated biases against any writing not anchored in print culture. The easiest step for us to take was the step affirming that work should be judged in the medium in which it is published. This mandate did not trample on the scholarly monographs of others. It did not directly affect the qualitative or quantitative standards of the "real work" that we were doing. It was more of a courtesy than a change in our thinking. Then it happened. The large cohort of digital media faculty members banded with other senior faculty members who had shifted their emphases to digital composing and sent the Executive Committee, the department's elected advisory group, a manifesto. Imagine. Their manifesto outlined what changes we would have to make to our promotion and tenure document, a document that already carried a sentence about our commitment to considering digital scholarship, a document that already was as "capacious" as the literature faculty wanted it to be. First, the digital media cohort and their allies pushed to revise the phrase "a published book" to a "published book or equivalent body of scholarship." The Executive Committee was apprehensive about such a change, favoring "a published book or a sustained, original scholarly project in another form appropriate to the field." Having made that substantive change, most of us thought the scrimmage was over. (It never mounted to a battle.) Then those who work in digital media caught us by surprise by chipping away at conjunctions, adverbs, adjectives, and all manner of innocent-looking nouns in the document that exposed biases that those who work with print culture had normalized. The Executive Committee, whose members mostly worked in literature, initially scoffed at some of the changes. The department was ready to trot into the twenty-first century, but the digital folks were galloping there, and the Executive Committee saw it as their

job to hold the reins. Although we had accepted words such as "globalization" and "digitalization," "informatization" was going too far. Literacy in the information age was becoming too vexed too fast.

Although the document followed most of the recommendations of the task force, those most solidly working in fields of digital media began exposing our document's flawed reliance on the terminology and thinking processes of print culture. Thus began their capacious caper to rewrite a document that tacitly was print normative. The digital media cohort's manifesto outlined what most departments of English still needed to do to change the dominance of print culture:

These proposed amendments to the Department of English Appointments, Promotion, and Tenure (APT) Document are intended to help candidates for promotion and tenure, and review committees, present and assess scholarly work in digital media (that is, work in any field of English studies composed or disseminated *in* digital forms, not necessarily work *on* digital media). The amendments address three problems with the current APT document:

- Various descriptions of the criteria for scholarship are open to conflicting interpretations regarding the status of work in digital media.
- The language of the current APT document is not consistently inclusive enough to guide consideration of work in digital media.

To address those concerns, the proposed language

- assumes throughout that scholarship of the highest quality occurs in diverse media;
- extends that acknowledgement to all sub-fields of English studies and to all genres of scholarship, including those traditionally associated with print (e.g., monographs and journal articles);
- recognizes that scholars may choose to publish their scholarship in a particular medium because of the unique characteristics of that medium and that, therefore, such work should normally be evaluated in the medium for which it is intended.

Internal Clarity and Consistency Regarding the Status of Diverse Media

In the listing of general criteria for promotion and tenure reviews, the APT document states that "Evidence of scholarship should consist of published writing, singly or collaboratively authored, *or*, where appropriate, recordings, videotapes, films, and works in electronic or other media, singly or collaboratively produced" ("Faculty Appointments" 16–17; emphasis added). The phrasing ("or") suggests an equivalence among various media—*qua media*. Yet in the description of criteria for promotion to associate professor with tenure, the

document states that such evidence “typically takes the form of a published book as well as essays in major refereed journals or edited volumes, conference papers at national meetings of scholarly organizations, and book reviews and review essays. Where appropriate, evidence of scholarship *may also include* textbooks and journal articles on pedagogy, recordings, videotapes, films, and works in electronic or other media, singly or collaboratively produced. These forms of scholarship will be evaluated by the same process and according to the same criteria as all other forms of scholarship” (“Faculty Appointments” 17; emphasis added). While the word “typically” allows for work in other media to serve as the primary body of scholarship presented by a candidate for promotion and tenure, the phrase “may also include” could be interpreted to assign a *supplemental* status to such work. The document should unambiguously establish that all of our quantitative and qualitative criteria can be met by work in any medium.

Inclusive Language

Even if one allows that the document establishes that work in diverse media can meet all of our criteria for scholarship, the language elsewhere reverts to a “print-only” vocabulary. For example, in the discussion of the criteria for promotion to associate professor with tenure, the document states that “Typically, a candidate for promotion to the rank of Associate Professor with tenure will be expected to present to reviewers a *book* published (or at least a finished manuscript under final, board-approved contract and in production) by a *scholarly press* with a strong reputation” (“Faculty Appointments” 17–18; emphasis added). Throughout the document, we proposed adopting more inclusive language such as “book or equivalent body of scholarship” in order to establish consistently and unambiguously that our criteria for scholarship focus on quantity and quality, not medium. Similar changes broaden the scope of expert testimony to which we might turn when evaluating the contribution of scholarship to the candidate’s field.

One of the proposed changes would require the Department to accept a body of scholarship that does not meet our expectations of unquestionably high quality, sufficient quantity, and clear evidence of impact on the candidate’s field(s).

Your colleagues in Digital Media Studies,
 Laura Bartlett
 Catherine C. Braun
 Susan H. Delagrangé
 Scott Lloyd DeWitt
 Ben McCorkle
 Cynthia L. Selfe
 Richard (Dickie) Selfe
 H. Louis Ulman

I was caught between powerful forces. On the one hand, the MLA was calling for “a more capacious conception,” sending forth a call to eschew the “dominance of the scholarly monograph.” Our digital media studies faculty members, too, were placing under the microscope all phrases that privileged print culture. On the other hand, the powerful lobbying group of mostly senior professors “who had earned their tenure the hard way” felt that the digital folks were “pulling a fast one” and were skeptical of BlackBerries, iPods, podcasts, e-books, flash drives, wireless modems, routers, digital cameras, and anything with a Bluetooth. To ward off potential warfare, to make sense of this capacious caper that was happening in the cyberspace of our department, I turned to Cynthia L. Selfe, our leading authority on twenty-first-century technologies, someone who helped found the field of digital studies, someone known for collaboration and synthesis.

DIGITAL STUDIES WRITES BACK

Cynthia L. Selfe

As one of the digital media specialists in the Department of English, I recognize that our department, like many others in this country, has experienced its share of challenges as colleagues work together to understand and extend new patterns of information design, production, and exchange that have come to characterize globalized digital environments. Thanks to the pioneering efforts of colleagues such as H. Lewis Ulman and Scott L. DeWitt, our departmental community has recognized for some

time that our scholarly and instructional work is being fundamentally affected by rapidly changing digital technologies and networks. Exacerbating the effects of this technological climate is a set of disturbing—and often related—trends in academic culture. Many of these have been identified in the recent *Report of the MLA Task Force on Evaluating Scholarship for Tenure and Promotion*: among them, increasing demands for scholarly productivity in universities engaged in what Richard P. Chait calls

a “prestige economy” (qtd. in *Report* 12); shrinking resources for humanities publishing, especially among university presses; and an almost single-minded focus on the scholarly monograph as the “gold standard” of academic excellence (4).

As we all know, the “widespread anxiety” prompting this report has considerable basis in fact (3). Over 62% of the departments responding to the MLA survey that preceded this report noted that “publication has increased in importance in tenure decisions over the last ten years”; 88.9% of the departments in Carnegie Doctorate-granting, 44.4% in Carnegie Master’s, and 48% in Carnegie Baccalaureate institutions ranked the “publication of a monograph as ‘very important’ or ‘important’ for tenure.” In addition, 32.9% of all departments and 49.8% of departments in doctorate-granting institutions expect “progress toward the completion of a second book for tenure” (4). An increasing value has also been assigned to articles in refereed scholarly journals, which only 1.6% of departments characterized as “not important” (5).

Fueling anxieties about such requirements, the MLA report found, are factors related to technological change. The report points to the work of Phil Pochada, who notes that university presses have suffered in recent years from budget restrictions in institutions of higher education and have “increasingly been asked to operate as businesses that must cover their costs and have lost or had sharply reduced their subsidies from the institution.” Traditional university presses, the report continues, have responded, in part, by “discontinuing publication in certain humanities subjects altogether” or “reducing the humanities list,” thus “narrowing . . . publishing possibilities, especially in fields viewed as marginal” (16). This trend has been accelerated and magnified by the increasing amount of information and scholarship now available online and by the recent moves to make many digital books available at reduced or no cost—an effort that further threatens the slim profit margins of university presses and the resources they have available to focus on humanities publishing projects. Digital publishing technologies have made it possible for professional organizations, small groups of scholars, and university libraries to distribute electronic scholarship without incurring the costs of paper, ink, printing, and binding. Such work, moreover, can be published more rapidly than conventional monographs, distributed

more widely, and reviewed more easily. University presses that do not recognize these changing material contexts—and adapt to them—face a dim future, a fact that does not escape most humanities scholars who often depend on these presses to help make their reputation and their case for tenure or promotion.

A second source of anxiety is the disconnect between the profession’s increasing dependence on electronic scholarly resources—*The Wilfred Owen Multimedia Digital Archive*, the *Perseus Project*, *The Vergil Project* at the University of Pennsylvania, the *Rossetti Archive*, *The William Blake Archive*, for example—and its lack of experience in evaluating such projects or seeming reluctance to value some digital forms (databases, Web sites, digital archives, etc.) as publications that can earn scholars tenure and promotion. Such difficulties are not limited, in addition, to the more exotic forms of electronic databases or archives. Indeed, as the MLA report notes, “40.8% of departments in doctorate-granting institutions report no experience evaluating refereed articles in electronic format, and 65.7% report no experience evaluating monographs in electronic format” (5). In too many cases, computers and new forms of electronic publication, the explosion of digital networks and databases, are seen—and resented—in departments of English as heralding the “end of [the document’s] influential reign. Old document forms and institutions—books, journals, and newspapers, on the one hand, publishers, and libraries, on the other—seem about to dissolve before our eyes” in the face of technological change—and these trends often make English departments very nervous places indeed (Brown and Duguid 1).

A final source of anxiety, as Valerie Lee has pointed out, has to do with the effects of new digital media, emerging digital genres, and digital media scholarship on the richly textured landscape of cultural and ideological formations that shape the social lives of English departments: common, historically constituted disciplinary perceptions about scholarly genres and their value; long-acknowledged understandings about proper scope, focus, and forms of intellectual work; long-standing commitments to a set of deeply sedimented academic conventions, habits of mind, and methodological approaches.

Given these cultural contexts, departments of English often find themselves challenged simulta-

neously by the forces of stasis and change in the contemporary academic landscape. Increasing numbers of digital scholars, who are busy creating emerging genres, experimenting with new forms, and authoring multimodal works from bits of video, audio, animation, and still photographs, have come to believe that digital media, emerging genres, and composing environments so fundamentally change the topography of important historical formations (authorship, genres, disciplines, texts) in departments of English that the important discursive maps used to describe, guide, and evaluate our efforts—for instance, our appointments, promotion, and tenure documents—provide little useful guidance. At the same time, however, many English faculty members continue to find much of value in the carefully crafted approaches and language that characterize such traditional documents and, indeed, the culture of print scholarship as a whole. There is still a great deal of commitment to undertaking thoughtful internal and external reviews of scholars' work, maintaining a focus on the intellectual scope and reach of scholarly projects, insisting on scholarly excellence, and investing in policy and procedures designed to ensure the equitable treatment of scholars seeking tenure. The task of reconciling these sometimes conflicting (and sometimes overlapping) value systems—one that often places a primary emphasis on change and exerts a centrifugal influence on the profession and the other that tends to honor the strength of tradition and exerts a centripetal influence—is not easy. Further, the personal stakes are high. It is in the “contact zones” (Pratt) of tenure and promotion guidelines that the contested terms and values of these differing belief systems are inscribed, and it is during tenure and promotion cases that they are identified, thrown into sharp relief, and sedimented. Depending on the department, the scholars, the institution, and the collective values informing such contexts, the tenor and the outcomes of such discussions vary widely.

As we grappled with such issues in the Department of English at the Ohio State University, we were fortunate to have Lee serving as our chair. Lee proved to be a rare department leader, one who not only recognized the differing value systems informing the department's scholarly work but also, and perhaps more important, was willing to model open-minded approaches to finding the common ground at the heart of competing understandings.

Given Lee's support—as well as that of other senior scholars who helped us identify the intellectual values resting at the heart of the department's shared academic endeavor—the digital media faculty members¹ identified four goals in which all our colleagues could invest:

- retaining a value on the thoughtful peer review of scholarship, while recognizing that such review can take multiple forms
- retaining a value on scholarship that has a productive and visible effect on a scholar's field and significant intellectual reach
- retaining a value on the highest scholarly standards, excellence, and intellectual innovation
- retaining a value on parity and equity with regard to scholarly standards for excellence, while valuing and recognizing important differences in emerging forms and genres of scholarly work

We then linked these goals, as carefully as we could, both to the specific language of the departmental appointments, promotion, and tenure guidelines (“Faculty Appointments”) and to the changes we wanted made to that document (see table).

The primary goal of this work was to help colleagues understand what we shared rather than how we differed, how the changes we wanted were linked to the values we had already endorsed as a community of scholars.

One of the important values to retain was an emphasis on peer review. We also, however, considered it crucial for colleagues to recognize that digital media texts were frequently evaluated by emerging forms of postproduction review as well as conventional forms of preproduction review: electronic citation counts, hits, online reviews and print reviews, and awards. McKenzie Wark's book *GAM3R 7H30RY (Gamer Theory)*, for example, was published in a serial format online in 2006 on a Web site sponsored by the Institute for the Future of the Book. Wark, in introducing the new networked book, encouraged readers to respond to his ideas in draft form. Readers' comments on this first-edition text were so pertinent and insightful that when a print edition of *Gamer Theory* was published by Harvard University Press on 18 April 2007, it included many comments from the earlier online edition. Such emerging postproduction review mechanisms, we felt, when considered carefully and appropriately by specialists in the area

Identifying Common Scholarly Values

Current Values and Practices	Parity for Digital Media Works
Retain a value on peer review, while recognizing that peer review can take a variety of forms.	Recognize that digital media texts are often evaluated by postproduction as well as preproduction review and that postproduction review, when considered carefully and appropriately by specialists in the area of study, is often highly indicative of the work’s effect on a field: electronic citation counts, hits, online reviews and print reviews, and awards (McKenzie Wark, <i>Gamer Theory</i> , Harvard UP).
Retain value on scholarship that has a productive and visible effect on the field and an intellectual reach.	Recognize usage figures for, and scholarly references to, digital media collections and archives. Recognize awards by national organizations, groups, and journals with a specialized stake in vetting emerging media forms (<i>Computers and Composition’s</i> Michelle Kendrick Outstanding Digital Scholarship Award, <i>Kairos’s</i> Best CoverWeb Award).
Retain value on the highest scholarly standards, excellence, and intellectual innovation.	<p>Recognize that excellence takes forms other than print monographs (e.g., <i>The Wilfred Owen Multimedia Digital Archive</i>, the <i>Perseus Project</i>, <i>The Vergil Project</i> at the University of Pennsylvania, the <i>Rossetti Archive</i>, <i>The William Blake Archive</i>). Learn how to read new forms of digital media work. Rely, in part, on external reviews by specialists in digital media (and departmental resources like the DMP) to help us inform ourselves and our own judgments about the importance of emerging forms, their innovative contributions to various fields of English studies, and the intellectual work involved in creating these texts, collections, and systems.</p> <p>Understand that the evaluation of new and expanding forms of critical and scholarly work in English studies must remain as elastic as our openness to new intellectual content.</p>
Retain value on parity and equity with scholarly standards for excellence, while valuing and recognizing important differences in emerging forms and genres of scholarly work.	<p>Establish parity for scholars producing digital media work by removing language that marks such work unfairly. Such language has a chilling effect for digital media scholars and puts them at a disadvantage for producing the very work we have hired them to produce.</p> <p>Remove language from current tenure and promotion criteria that characterizes print and book texts as <i>typical</i> or normal (“This evidence [of “significant, high-quality contributions to important conversations in their field”] <i>typically</i> takes the form of a published book as well as essays in refereed journals....” [16]).</p> <p>Remove language that marks digital media work as <i>additional or supplemental</i> (“Where appropriate, evidence of scholarship <i>may also</i> include textbooks and journal articles on pedagogy, recordings, videotapes, films, and works in electronic or other media, singly or collaboratively produced” [16]).</p>

N.B. Digital media works: Texts that are created, distributed, and read or used in digital media environments. There are a variety of such texts: databases, annotated electronic textual editions, scholarly Web collections, hypermedia works, scholarly and creative blogs, digital video and audio texts, digital multimodal compositions, online journals and CoverWebs.

of study, were highly indicative of a digital work's effect on a field and should be considered in cases of tenure and promotion.

In a related sense, we thought it important for colleagues—both those who were evaluating cases for promotion and tenure and those who were putting together their own case portfolio—to pay particular attention to how national organizations, groups, and journals with a specialized stake in vetting emerging media forms recognized scholarly excellence in digital media work. Specialized journals sponsor awards to honor exemplary digital media works, such as *Computers and Composition's* annual Michelle Kendrick Outstanding Digital Scholarship Award, and the online journal *Kairos* annually sponsors the Best CoverWeb Award. Similarly, professional organizations such as the Conference on College Composition and Communication present an annual Technology Innovator Award. We also thought it was key to recognize usage figures for, and scholarly references to, digital media collections and archives.

Undergirding each of these changes, of course, was the need for colleagues to recognize that scholarly work in English studies continues to be elastic and that excellence takes forms other than print monographs. For our department, because so many colleagues already used online scholarly archives and databases, this case was not a difficult one to make. We also, however, wanted to encourage colleagues—especially those who serve on tenure and promotion committees—to learn how to read new

forms of digital media work in their native environment. In this effort, we were fortunate to be able to rely on departmental resources like the Digital Media Project, a facility staffed by knowledgeable graduate students and professionals who could help us approach this reading work in thoughtful ways, as well as discuss with us our own judgments about the importance of emerging forms, their innovative contributions to various fields of English studies, and the intellectual work involved in creating these texts, collections, and systems.

Finally, as Lee has noted, the digital media scholars in our department felt that it was important to insist on parity for scholars producing digital media work by removing language that privileged print-based forms over digital forms of scholarship and thus marked digital work unfairly. Such language has a chilling effect, especially for untenured digital media scholars, and puts them at a disadvantage for producing the very work the department hired them to produce. Given this goal, we advocated removing all language from the current tenure and promotion guidelines that characterized print and book texts as typical or normal, that is, the passage that noted, “This evidence [of ‘significant, high-quality contributions to important conversations in their field’] *typically* takes the form of a published book as well as essays in refereed journals” (“Faculty Appointments,” 16; our emphasis).

We also thought it best to suggest removing all language that marked digital media work as additional or supplemental (see table).

OUR CAPER IN HINDSIGHT

Valerie Lee and Cynthia L. Selfe

Our good colleague Brenda Brueggemann, a leading scholar in disability studies, reminds us that technologies used initially to help those who have been termed disabled—persons who are deaf or hard of hearing, blind or struggling with diminished eyesight, or limited in their mobility—often have the unintended consequence of serving communities who consider themselves fully abled precisely because these groups share some common needs and fundamental values, even as they differ widely on others. Captioning, for instance, originally used to help

deaf and hard-of-hearing communities, also serves people who want to follow the news on television while walking on treadmills at the gym and those who want to watch French films with English subtitles. Curb cuts, similarly, first designed for those who navigated the world in wheelchairs or those with limited mobility, are now treasured by moms and dads pushing strollers, cyclists and skateboarders, walkers and runners, the elderly and school children alike.

Although the stakes and terms of our capacious caper are quite different from, and in many ways

less serious than, those Brueggemann explores, the lessons we have learned about shared needs and values have striking similarities. The scholars in our department—those who focus on historical periods, the folklorists, the digital media specialists, the Shakespeareans and the rhetoricians, the compositionists and creative writers, the linguists and narrative theorists—regardless of their differing opinions on textual scholarship, methods of inquiry, and the proper focus for work in the humanities, share a communal value on scholarly excellence, intellectual contributions to a field, informed peer review, and the scope and reach characterizing the very best work scholars can produce. On this common ground we can meet and talk and value one another's contributions in ways that are systematic, thoughtful, and respectful. And this shared set of values can most productively inform our decisions on appointment, tenure, and promotion—whatever the kind of work produced.

An important part of our collective job, of course, is to make sure that the same commitment to intellectual open-mindedness and equity and critically informed understanding central to our shared intellectual study of humanities is reflected in the pragmatic documents that define our insti-

tutional relationships with, and our responsibilities toward, our colleagues. Here, the study of the humanities and our practices as human beings come together in meaningful ways.

Note

1. Contributors to the efforts to revise our departmental guidelines were Catherine C. Braun, Susan H. Delagrange, Scott L. DeWitt, Warren Benson McCorkle, Richard J. Selfe, Leslie Tannenbaum, and H. Lewis Ulman.

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