

Why We Blog: An Essay in Four Movements

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Abstract

This essay comprises four parts, each by one of the co-bloggers at *In the Middle* (<http://www.inthemedievalmiddle.com>). Karl Steel argues that the benefits of academic blogging outweigh its potential humiliations, and that academic conferences should post their papers publicly and allow for comments so that conferences, in a sense, never end. Graduate students and junior scholars should be encouraged to blog to help build a community and a trade in ideas, and to accustom them to the feelings of exposure and humiliation common to all writing, which will thereby train them to become more confident scholars. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen examines some of the difficulties posed by the age of e-medieval: an internet culture of negativity. Blogging entails finding strategies for managing harsh or off topic comments, as well as for coping with unwanted attention. Drawing on the pedagogical distinction Nancy Sommers makes between process and product, Mary Kate Hurley examines the role blogs might play in creating a communal space in which to share unfinished ideas. Blogs might be an ideal medium for the process of thinking, rather than the finished work of having had thought. Eileen A. Joy argues there may be more value in thinking and “working through” our scholarship online, in an “open” environment that promotes and invites democratic, catholic, and convivial support, as well as the accidental tourist and silent voyuer, than there is in the traditional “finished product” of a journal article or book. It pleads, further, for a better awareness of the fact that intellectual property is always co-extensive and communal.

Two Proposals for Increasing Persistence, Exposure, and Humiliation

Karl Steel

Six years ago, Jeffrey asked me to join Eileen and him online for, as I remember, “a few weeks,” just until they could get themselves out from under some work.¹ They never let me go, and I don’t expect they ever will. In my intermittent blogging at *In the Middle* (hereafter *ITM*) since then, I conducted my medieval education in public, to re-purpose, on a humbler scale, Hegel’s infamous jibe against Schelling. On the blog, I’ve exposed myself and my academic faults permanently, and here, in this small piece, I’m offering a pair of proposals to encourage others to do the same.

Permanent, or something close to is, in that I expect even deleted blog posts to endure in the “Internet Archive: Wayback Machine” or some future technology, so that what I say may continue to be said somewhere by one of my prior, but uncannily persisting, iterations. So far as I know, I have no control over whether what I’ve said on the blog will go on being said. If you’re online, the same goes for you, already.²

This persistence alone counters the charge that “blogging is just a platform,”³ no different, for example, than delivering a conference paper. For obvious reasons, the public of both *ITM* and academic conferences may be largely the same, and a post’s comments, at

their best, work like a conference q&a, but one in which audience members are encouraged to interact with each other rather than only the presenter. Blogging improves on conferences even more, though, by freeing us from the temporal limits of a conference schedule, and from the requirement that presenter, audience, and interlocutors occupy the same room for the duration of their conversation. This is an obvious point, worth repeating.

In this regard, whatever the charges of elitism that might be laid against *ITM* for, say, its particular (and in modern academia, anomalous) core of writers (mostly tenured or close to it), or even for its theoretically esoteric bent (most recently, a tendency towards object-oriented ontologies), *ITM* is a great deal more public and in certain ways even more *democratic* than the traditional conference of our peers. Anyone with access to the Internet and equipped with the knowledge of how to use it can read anything we have written. For better or worse, anyone can let us know what they think, whenever they like. And even the apparent failures at *ITM*, suffered by all us – laboriously composed posts that elicited nothing but silence – still might attract some attention. No failure of this sort is permanent. Nor should they quite be called failures: it may be that pieces I thought flopped were read avidly and continue to resonate outside my perception. The same can't be said for a couple of my Sunday-morning Kalamazoo papers, swallowed by empty rooms at the end of their allotted 20 minutes.

Obviously, I'm advocating for more blogging. Or, perhaps just as well, permanent conference web pages that include as many conference papers as presenters are willing to have posted, with space provided for comments or at least email addresses.⁴ If needed, slight increases in registration fees could pay for web hosting. These spaces would constitute an archive whose contents, by design, continued to change. Then the conference need never finish (and, one hopes, session-jumping might cease, because we know we could read any paper we missed). If a paper posted in this way finally achieved print, then that could be noted online, which might potentially land journals more readers than they might have otherwise received.

For good reason, some will object to this proposal. I hope that publishers will realize that work published online does not steal from but rather intensifies interest in the printed, (presumably) more refined developments of the same arguments (Mittell). What success my book will have will be, I imagine, largely due to the interest built by the blog.

Persistence of course presents other, more serious problems. The bad readings, inept translations, bibliographic omissions, and erroneous corrections of senior scholars – all the academic sins that we always think ourselves to be committing – will embarrass us forever. Graduate students, who have no business saying anything to anyone but their dissertation chairs, will ruin their careers. Junior scholars will be expelled, sans tenure, into the kinds of work they hoped never to do, or into no work at all. Bloggers will find themselves tethered perpetually to a reading, for example, on the *Yvain* of “de Troyes.” And we should all tremble to know that talking about anyone online inevitably summons them: Pierre Haidu, James Simpson, Sylvia Huot, Patricia Ingham, and many others have dropped by *ITM*, to complain, to encourage us, to join in. That can be scary.

I want to acknowledge this anxiety, in the sense of both marking its existence and affirming its validity; and then I want to push past it. Speaking from my experience of transitioning from being a graduate student to an assistant professor to a book-published assistant professor, all while blogging, I can say that writing online for a public of mediavalists, senior and otherwise, has given me a community, saving me, when I needed it most, from the savage loneliness that I understand afflicts most graduate students. Perhaps as importantly, blogging gave my scholarship a confidence, playfulness, and inventiveness that I doubt I could have found any other way.

I have, as well, exposed myself to humiliation; I've probably been humiliated in ways I barely understand; and when I scavenge my early posts for material for current projects, I keep my eyes half-shut over fear of what I'll find. Yet isn't this true for any scholar who keeps working? If it's a problem, it's a more general one. If we're doing it right, shouldn't we always be a little embarrassed over what we once thought or wrote? We have to publish, anyhow, so embarrassment will find us out if we live long enough in the profession. We should always know ourselves exposed, to other scholars, even to the public, and, I hope, to our future selves. This is a problem, but the only way to avoid it is not to exist at all.

My vote's for maximizing exposure in the hope that the larger community of scholars is as generous as we believe ourselves to be in our better moments. Per one of our blog's commenters, let's "tak[e] a stand for optimism about ourselves and our profession" ("Kristin").⁵ With the proviso that I speak from a position of (so far) success, which itself provides a kind of *après-coup* justification, I can recommend my path to all junior medievalists. Regardless of whether hidebound academics (if indeed they exist) believe blogging to be only irrelevant para-scholarship for any tenure considerations, I believe that I would not be where I am without having blogged. If this argument needs to be made, I think there are good professional reasons to blog that have to do with forcing oneself to be productive in public and with making oneself available as both a public scholar and a scholar-of-first-resort for those looking to populate anthologies, special issues, and paper clusters.

At the same time, I should also acknowledge that it's hard to keep a blog going. *ITM's* nearly 6-year existence is a rarity amid other medieval blogs, which have generally proven to be far more ephemeral. With that in mind, I offer another proposal to save individual or temporary affiliations of students the trouble of maintaining their own blog when they ought to be finishing their dissertations: graduate programs should run blogs open to the contributions of their students. Surely faculty or a research assistant could supervise such a project on a rotating basis. Even if such a blog were open only to an audience of their peers and departmental faculty, students would come to know more about the work of their fellows; they would build a richer community of scholarship among themselves (and perhaps with other graduate students at other institutions, if a kind of "consortium" of these semi-private blogs were set up to connect students in similar sub-disciplines); they would (I hope) learn to engage civilly with their equals (and not only their professors) in intellectual disputes in an environment whose supposed anonymity often encourages nastiness; and they would learn to write for a public rather than (only) for a seminar leader, and indeed write to create the public their scholarship wants. This may be the most important skill in helping young medievalists realize what we're told is the most important professional transition, that from being students to being confident colleagues. We just need to tell ourselves, and our students, that only exposure will dull the fear of being read. And we, someone's big other, need to tell them, too, that the fear never goes away, so we, and they, might as well write.

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The Darker Side of Blogging

Jeffrey Jerome Cohen

I have long been an advocate of blogging and other forms of social media for academics at all career points.⁶ My message in this piece will therefore surprise some readers: blogs and other internet forums require vast amounts of unrewarded labor, expose you to

what is worst in your fellow humans, and destroy your equanimity. Turn off your computer now and walk away.

Well, not really. Yet having in the past focused upon what is positive about this digital era, I here want to explore the darker side of the Net. Blogging offers challenges that can be dispiriting. Publishing material for conversation rather than admiration requires vulnerability, a commitment (as Karl, Mary Kate and Eileen have written in their own contributions) to one's own self-pedagogy. There are other dangers: angering a colleague, alienating a potential employer, exposing more of yourself than intended, attracting unwanted attention. What follows is a personal account of a few blog-related difficulties, phenomena that have sometimes caused me to be weary and wary about e-life ... but not enough to give up on social media for scholars. In the end the good far outweighs the dark.

Cyberspace is the realm where we purchase books, shoes, and snake oil; download salacious images; skim the news and ogle celebrity hijinks; research Anglo-Norman loanwords, dogs ready to be adopted, or plane schedules; and share works of art and scholarship, among many other things. The internet is also a snark factory. The Grouse and the Cavil are among its most frequently encountered fauna – along with the Whinge, the Quibble and the Peeve. Read the comments to any unmoderated site, from online newspapers to Amazon product pages, and you'll be lectured in succinct and vivid language about what's wrong with the government, the tax code, the weather, contemporary music, service at restaurants, France, liberals, books with big words, and polar bears – typically under headings having little to do with such subjects. I gave up reading the comments to NPR articles when a news item on the aurora borealis became an impassioned exchange on birth certificates and the presidency. Although tone is easy to misread, especially when emotion binds us to a subject, these interchanges often fail to rise beyond the level of snipe: no conversation or true debate, both of which require patient listening. Few minds are likely changed as a result of vitriolic comments. Persuasion requires trust, imperturbability, doggedness. Very often electronic pronouncements seem drive-by. Something negative is posted on impulse, and the author doesn't check back to view the consequences of the published words. Internet forums can create the effect of impulsive, loud and lonely shouts in rooms so large the walls cannot be discerned. Such spaces do not in general stage communalizing events.

Moderation may assist in keeping comment threads on topic and tone civil enough to inhibit shouting. So can systems such as the banning of anonymity and user-rated ranking of remarks, where highly rated submissions appear first in the thread. Crowd sourcing does work. Katherine Rowe spearheaded an open peer review process for the special issue of *Shakespeare Quarterly* that she guest edited on "Shakespeare and New Media." The forthcoming issue of *postmedieval* on "Becoming-Media" (ed. Jen Boyle and Martin K. Foys) created a lively website for its experiment in open review, one that stressed accountability through public identity as part of its comment process. Double blind peer review has long been held to be the gold standard for scholarly publishing, but these experiments in new media have demonstrated viable alternatives, options that may in fact increase the critical depth of the published piece and magnify its impact. The downside of such publishing events is that they do require a significant commitment of time, a resource in rather short supply among most academics. When my docket is crammed with tenure letters, article reviews, and books to evaluate for publication, reading and then commenting upon more essays can seem another chore, no matter how good those essays are. That doesn't mean I won't do it, of course. I believe strongly in such projects. Yet in the end I often cannot carve out the time required to give the serious, insightful feedback such crowdsourcing demands, and fall prey to diffusion of responsibility. The internet is a great multiplier of

work. I won't say *uncompensated* labor, because there are rewards involved – mainly intangible, but rewards all the same. Still, commenting on blogs and contributing to open peer review isn't a kind of work much visible to the professional reward system. It is mostly a selfless endeavor. No wonder some people are rather irritable by the time they find themselves typing comments in an electronic forum. It's too bad polar bears, wordy academics, and France must bear the brunt of their irascibility.

Even as I am composing this essay, I see that someone has been posting dismissive comments on the Facebook page we maintain for the blog *In the Middle*. We used the page to disseminate to those who had "liked" us there a publication announcement about Karl Steel's new book *How to Make a Human*. The volume has just appeared in print, and we linked to the publisher's website so that *ITM*'s 564 fans could follow it from their newsfeed if they wished. One of these fans quickly posted a dismissive response, apparently without having followed the link. When challenged by Eileen Joy to think more deeply about the project before reacting negatively, he downloaded and skimmed a PDF of excerpts from the book made available by the publisher. He quickly posted another comment, complaining that *How to Make a Human* had ignored the work of historians. Karl then replied, pointing out that the reader's objection was in fact patently untrue: all he had to do was consult the bibliography, included in the PDF. The original commenter seemed taken aback, apparently not realizing that the book's author happens to be one of the *ITM* co-bloggers.

Three things deserve notice within this interchange. First, the commenter reacted just as internet culture encourages us to respond: with brevity, derision, and declarative confidence. The comment had little to do with the actual content of the monograph; it was a condemnation of the project based upon quick reading of the publisher's blurb. To engage deeply with the substance of Karl's argument would ideally require reading an entire book, and that's a slow process; the internet does not like slow. Second, the author of *How to Make a Human* was able to add his voice swiftly, much to the surprise of the commentator. Karl thus prevented the thread from becoming a lament about how historians are always neglected and about how the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Jacques Derrida is outmoded and deserves disparaging: observations that may or may not be true but have little to do with the volume itself. Last, one way of looking at what unfolded is to appreciate the rapid curtailing of what could have blossomed into a dyspeptic exchange marked by increasing passion and diminishing readability (that is, a normal comment thread on many news sites and blogs). Yet it is also clear from the start an imbalance of power obtains in such a situation. Only the four authors of *ITM* can send out links to the many people who have fanned the Facebook page, just as (invited guest posts aside), we are the only four who can publish on the blog's main page. Everyone else's words appear in the comments section, which are moderated by us. When Eileen Joy, Karl Steel, Mary Kate Hurley and I post on the *ITM* Facebook wall, we are identified with an icon and name that makes it seem like the blog itself is speaking, no matter which one of us is commenting. We therefore sign our names or initials as well, but it can make it seem like we are ganging up on those we disagree with when visually the *ITM* icons are so numerous in the thread.

And, in all honesty, sometimes we *are* ganging up. We share an ethos as bloggers – that is why we blog together – and so we typically possess a consensus about many value-laden topics. That is not to say that we do not disagree with each other; we do. But we stress respectful dissent and considered dialogue. None of us has much tolerance for quick dismissiveness and drive-by snark. As a result of this impatience, some readers believe that *ITM* fosters a feel-good acceptance and discourages critique. I don't think so, but I will freely admit that our values are liberal and patent. Perhaps these shared principles also



Fig. 1. Atop a dormant volcano, Tower Hill, Victoria, Australia.

makes the blog seem clubby. Personally, I think our communal values are what made both natural and predictable our lobbying to have the Medieval Academy of America move its annual meeting from Arizona to protest that state's racist immigration law. They also explain why we tend to focus on the young in the field: graduate students, those publishing first books, those whose work is not yet well known. We are medievalists who share an ethical and utopian commitment to futurity.

I don't ever want *ITM* to seem an exclusive domain. Yet I have been told that I react too strongly against the culture of internet negativity. Perhaps I do, partly because I find it insidious and unappealing, whether in cyberspace or on the conference circuit. Nor do I exempt myself from extraneous negativity's lure: there have been remarks I've published on *ITM* that I wish I had never composed. I've been snarky about books and essays whose authors have found my comments and been upset by them; knowing how a callous word can cause emotion duress has made me more careful in what I post. *ITM* has also attracted its occasional trolls. We've all had our nasty or gatekeeping comments. A scolding tone comes too easily in some responses, even when the comment comes from a friend or former student. Worse can be the sly civility of comments that begin with "I am confused by ..." and "I am worried about ..." Sometimes the words that follow are well meant and advance dialogue, but at others they can be mere concern trolling. But in the end my reaction to such phenomena is the same: I roll my eyes, tune out, move on. Having a 14 year old son is good training. And I should emphasize that 98% of the blog comments I read at *ITM* and elsewhere in the medieval blogosphere are thoughtful, civil, and often brilliant. The nergling ones have a way of residing in the memory longer than is their due. I also realize the irony of having just spent a long while being negative about the internet culture of negativity.

I also admit that having had an internet stalker profoundly shaped my response to electronic interaction, forcing me to sharpen my beliefs about what works on a blog to foster lively, useful, effective and intellectually bracing community. Without going too deeply into a history that still awakens uncomfortable feelings, I will simply acknowledge that

the darkest side of blogging was having an impassioned reader fixated upon my life and work. This person's deeds were unlikely to have been a rational choice, yet his contempt and rage were not easy to bear. His actions extended to more than immoderate blog comments (though the daily chore of rejecting those was disagreeable enough). I found it uncomfortable to explain the situation to those who had been contacted by him. I learned that when you are the object of someone's rage, it is difficult not to think that you are somehow causing that animus to explode. His attention came and went in unpredictable cycles: long stretches of quiet, then a sudden explosion of comments and email. When he could no longer post at *ITM* because of our moderation policy he eventually started a blog of his own. Even though its mission was to critique *ITM*, that seemed perfectly fine. Although I never read his blog, free speech means that one can and should operate such spaces if one is so inclined, a place where those who wish to form a different kind of community may do so.

I lost some friends because of these difficulties, especially when I could not convince some whom I trusted and who knew this person that a problem existed that was worth being concerned about. It now seems self-dramatizing to write all of this down, mainly because nothing "real" came of the threats other than unwanted contact. Yet when someone is sending email that involves your family, that makes it clear he has researched property records and knows the acreage your house was built upon, you tend to worry about the crossing of lines. I also wonder if in now revisiting these episodes from the past, I will trigger another outbreak. I realize that if my objective is to ensure that something so unpleasant never unfolds again, silence is my best strategy. Yet I have always felt that remaining taciturn makes it seem as if the events never happened. It also leaves me alone with them. The stalking occurred, and it changed my relation to the internet.

Although sharing some personal information is an essential part of blogging, I am certainly more guarded than I used to be. *ITM* has become more of a quarantined, professional space as a result.⁷ I even thought seriously about ending my blogging career all together. Yet it is difficult for me to imagine returning to scholarship conducted the old fashioned way. Blogs and other forms of e-exchange are so much a part of my critical practice that I cannot happily return to more solitary modes. Blogging's darker side is in the end wholly eclipsed by its more luminous gifts ... and, this essay being done, those are the ones to which I intend to return.

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Process, Product, and Becoming an Academic

Mary Kate Hurley

In her essay "Responding to Student Writing," Nancy Sommers lays out a useful paradigm for thinking about the reasons we teach students to write in the humanities (particularly in English literature courses), and moreover, how we should effect such goals in our comments on student writing: "We need to show our students how to seek, in the possibility of revision, the dissonances of discovery – to show them through our comments why new choices would positively change their texts, and thus to show them the potential for development implicit in their own writing" (391–2). Her argument proceeds from a somewhat basic mistake most teachers of composition make in their commenting. By not creating a hierarchy of concerns (ranking concepts and ideas first, stylistic and mechanical execution second), teachers mistake the product – the essay – with the process of thinking, writing, and revising that produced it. That is, by focusing comments

on the essay as a finished piece of writing, rather than as a piece of writing that can still be productively revised, teachers miss an opportunity to intervene in the critical thinking skills that make critical writing possible.

This basic confusion – between product and process – and its ramifications form the background for what I explore in this essay. The conflict between product and process is, I argue, the very tension that blogs are well positioned to productively foreground. By highlighting the *process* of thinking, rather than the *product* of having had thought, a blog might be able to foster truly dynamic academic conversations while also helping to shape the kinds of academic minds most capable of taking part in them.

As Karl points out above, blogging is one way to conduct – in his case, for good rather than ill – your education in public. This education is somewhat similar to, if far more public than, the classroom experience in graduate school. The best seminars I have participated in have been equally influenced by the students and the professors in the room. Such seminars have indelibly changed my approach to research, writing, and teaching. Professor Cliff Siskin's injunction to “zoom out” rather than in on literary studies in my masters seminar of Fall 2004 is never far from my understanding of how literature operates in the world.⁸ The juxtaposition of medieval ideas of temporality and Bruno Latour's *We Have Never Been Modern* in Professor Carolyn Dinshaw's Fall 2007 seminar on Time and Temporality changed, fundamentally, the dissertation I was then just beginning to write.⁹ These moments of exploration in the classroom continue to shape my career and echo in my solitary writing ventures. Just as indelible, however, are the contributions made – and conversations sparked – by my fellow students in these classes: the presentations given and questions posed by the students in Dinshaw's class, or the work of colleagues who continue to “zoom out” in their literary studies and from that view see more possibility than I ever dreamed existed. One of my professors at Columbia, in a seminar on professionalization, noted that these are the connections that matter most: as much as we might (as graduate students) be interested in meeting or hearing the famous professors who give keynote addresses at conferences, the relationships that matter equally as much (if not more) are the connections we form horizontally, the conversations we have with the graduate students and junior professors who will be our colleagues for the next 40 years.

But once my classroom time ended, these conversations and productive leaps of critical imagination also fell away. That isn't to say they ceased to exist – my interactions with colleagues were just as generative as they had ever been. But with coursework over, thinking became a profoundly solitary activity. Books are pleasant enough interlocutors, but their ability to talk back is often curtailed by time or circumstance. In retrospect, I suppose, it isn't surprising that this is the very moment I chose to begin blogging. My initial decision to blog was partially motivated by an anxiety about isolation: I knew how hard studying for exams would be without public accountability at the intermediary stages of reading. Moreover, I understood how profoundly lonely such work could be.¹⁰ Despite my own growing anxiety over what is and is not “blog material,” I continue to experiment with the form, in part because I believe that the conversations I engage in with my colleagues “in the blogosphere” constitute the best reason to be an academic and the most forceful argument as to why academics can make a difference in the world by engaging in – modeling – critical thinking.

The distinction I found in my A.B.D. life that had not seemed so clear-cut as an M.A. or M.Phil. student was the distinction between thinking and having had thought – or to borrow Sommers' terms, between process and product. There is, in my experience, an overwhelming emphasis within graduate school on not being caught thinking.

Conference papers seem to be the exception, in part because in so many venues they are so fleeting. However, when it comes to virtually every other task of graduate school, the emphasis shifts to presenting oneself as “having had thought.” Articles must be meticulously researched, polished, and perfected before attempting to place them. Dissertations are the long, slow work of years. Only when finished (or substantially finished) should a dissertation be aired publicly.

I should be clear: I do not necessarily disagree with either of these principles. Scholarly works should be polished. Articles and books are the currency of the academic endeavor. They determine job placement and tenure results. These products ought to be “done” before they are submitted, even if they are rarely so finished once the readers’ reports come back. Even as I type these words, however, I also recognize that I am focused almost solely on the product. Despite the clarity with which I know that both dissertations and articles come from somewhere, I focus on results. I simultaneously obscure the process by which such products come into being. In the mystic ether that constitutes academic creation, the space in which we reflect on our writing as a practice is severely limited. We all know we have to write dissertations to get a Ph.D. We all know we have to write articles to get (and keep) a job. The question that needs to be asked, however, is how we learn to produce such things.

Dissertation seminars, the venerable Medieval Guild, and more recently an article workshop have created a “safe” space for that kind of work in my time as a graduate student at Columbia. However, seeing multiple drafts of someone else’s document – the movement from unstructured reflection to drafty attempt at argument to polished chapter, article, or even book – is something that we can only rarely encounter, much less reflect upon. Thus the feature I find most important about blogs is not necessarily their potential as collaborative or utopian spaces, although these are certainly important. Rather, I think blogs might offer a space where scholars can come together to share the central work of the academic endeavor: the lively, productive, and messy process of thinking, rather than the often (but not always) finished relics of having had thought.

And so I return to Sommers’ explicit interest in the process/product dichotomy. Although I have not always had the internal courage to share my own process, a key component of my graduate education has been the flexibility and liveliness with which my co-bloggers approach their scholarly work. Watching their process unfold – on the blog, at conferences, in articles, and in books – has helped me to learn about the process by which scholarly artifacts are created. Taking what I’ve always thought of as our blog “motto” to heart – “to see things in the middle, rather than looking down on them from above or up at them from below, or from left to right or right to left” (Deleuze and Guattari, 25) – I find it pushes me to take more academic risks than are always prudent for a potential job candidate. I didn’t and don’t always take those risks as a graduate student – anxiety about what my advisors would think, whether my ideas would be “safe,”¹¹ or whether I would regret blogging my thoughts about conferences or books often curtailed my ability and willingness to share.

But perhaps I can be guided in such anxious moments, by the advice of my undergraduate thesis advisor on the occasion of my graduation: “Mary Kate, always be generous.”¹² I’m grateful that Jeffrey, Eileen, and Karl are all willing to be so generous with their own time, thoughts, and writing. Because demystifying the academic endeavor – whether with a blog or through the careful guidance of advisors – is vital to the process of becoming that every graduate student undertakes as he or she moves from student to colleague.

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*Everything We Think can in Principle be Thought by Someone Else:
A Plea for Scholarship in the Open*

Eileen A. Joy

At the end of my working day, I am almost always depressed. Mine is not a straight path like an engineer's, it's not A to B. I make a very curly road just by the restrictions of goals and materials. . . . Everything we think can in principle be thought by someone else. The real ideas, as evolution shows, come about by chance. Reality is very creative.

– Theo Jansen

Although it often feels otherwise, we do not think alone. Every second of every day, there is a virtual crowd inside of our head, multiple voices, all vying for attention. I've long ago given up on the idea of an autonomous self, but every day, our particular and unique minds touch reality and become real (see Kateb 49). At the same time, that 'reality' represents an inescapable 'mesh': 'a complex situation or series of events in which a person is entangled; a concatenation of constraining or restricting forces or circumstances; a snare' (*Oxford English Dictionary*). I agree with Timothy Morton that 'everything is interconnected' and therefore 'there is no definite background and . . . no definite foreground' (28). But as Morton also asks,

If there is no background and therefore no foreground, then where are we? We orient ourselves according to backgrounds against which we stand out. There is a word for a state without a foreground-background distinction: madness. (30)

The fact of the matter is, in order to guard against this 'madness,' we imagine all sorts of background-foreground distinctions all of the time: we need them, and they are necessary, even consoling, fictions. As Aranye Fradenburg has been arguing a lot lately, confabulation may not be delusional but rather a crucial tool for understanding one's experiences.¹³

Take the Dutch artist Theo Jansen who makes kinetic sculptures called 'strandbeesten': for Jansen, these are living creatures, even though they are mainly made out of PVC pipes and other inanimate materials, such as nylon zip strips and plastic bottles. For over 21 years now, Jansen, 63 years old, has devoted himself to making these 'beests,' which are wind-powered, enabling them to walk, for example, along the beach in Holland.¹⁴ According to Ian Frazier, who authored a *New Yorker* profile on the sculptor, Jansen is 'secretly a landscape artist' and his strandbeests are just 'decoys to get us to notice the dunes, sea, and sky' (61), and it's true that when Jansen first started making these 'machines' – 'skeletons,' as Jansen puts it, that are 'able to walk on the wind' (Jansen qtd. in *Strandbeesten*) – that he engineered them to push the sand around and thereby help bolster the threatened, eroding dunes of the Holland coastline.

But this description of Jansen's 'creatures' also belies so much of what Jansen himself says about his work that is not included in the *New Yorker* article – that as it progressed, he realized he was making a 'new kind of life' (some might call it 'passive robotics') and that his work also represents 'research into the roots of life' (qtd. in *Strandbeesten*). Of his first prototypes, now decrepit and stowed away in a barn, he refers to them as being in their 'catacombs,' and he has also invented creative titles for the 'eras' of evolutionary development his 'beests' have gone through: the Gluton Period (1990–91) for the earliest period when his 'beests' were held together with tape, the Chorda Epoch (1991–93), and so on (Frazier 58). Of his ongoing work in making the creatures, he says, 'they give me . . . a place in the world and a way of living, and I give them life, so we both need each other. In fact, I couldn't live without them anymore. I think that's what you call symbiosis.' Jansen also hopes that the *beesten* will outlive him: 'What I'm doing now is

training these animals to survive on their own. . . . It's a thought which makes me quiet – when I die, I will be living for some time on. Of course this is a utopian thought. It's a fairy tale, something to look forward to, [but] with a lot of roots in reality as well, because some things, um, succeed' (qtd. in *Strandbeesten*).

Why dwell here on Jansen and his *strandbeesten*? Other than to point to him and his work as having gorgeously expanded the store of the world's beautiful creatures, and even having rescued the lowly-yet-ubiquitous PVC pipe from its status as a supposedly inanimate object and transformed it into a protein-like building block of new life forms (note to Jane Bennett: 'thing-power' never had it so good!)?¹⁵ While trying to think my way through how I might compose this piece on the value of open and collective forms of scholarship, enabled especially by blogging and social media such as Facebook and Google+, Theo Jansen and his creatures were much on my mind, and for very divergent reasons, all of which I think are worth describing here.

First, Jansen is a great example of a what we think of as a kind of solitary genius, even an heroic artist, who clearly likes to work alone (his website indicates he is not interested in taking on any interns)¹⁶ and who has dedicated over a third of his life to creating what he appears to believe (with some hedging) is a sort of new 'species,' but he doesn't really work alone, actually. He works with very particular materials – materials, moreover, that Jansen explains 'dictate to me what to do' and '[m]aybe that is why the Strandbeests appear to be alive, and charm us. The Strandbeests themselves have let me make them' (Frazier 58). Whether engineer-sculptors working with PVC pipes or medievalists working with manuscripts and other artifacts from the past, as well as with texts and language, and even when we are supposedly alone in our studies and libraries, we are always connected to and even *acted upon* by intricately-networked assemblages of actors and actants, persons (virtually enclosed in texts, but also our supervisors, mentors, peers, colleague friends, imaginary interlocutors, etc.), objects, locations and even atmospheres, and our agency as 'authors' is much more distributed (and even passive) than we might like to believe.¹⁷ Control is an illusion, as is objectivity, or even clear-sightedness. And creativity may even depend on this state of affairs, since it may be that the world brings ideas to us more so than that we bring ideas to the world. In this sense, scholarship would partly be about preparing ourselves, not to generate ideas, but to *receive* them.

This is just to say that when we keep our scholarly work primarily out of public sight (except for the occasional conference presentation) until its ultimate moment of publication in a conventional venue such as the academic journal or book, at that point of publication quite a few years of our lives (mainly spent in the solitude of school offices and libraries and other semi-private spaces where we can manage a foothold of quiet) may have been devoted to that work whose 'appearance' in print typically occurs long after we have moved on to other projects (and I put 'appearance' in quotation marks here because our work has been 'appearing' all along in front of us and others – and even more critically, *between* ourselves and others – with whom we share it, and the print publication is often the last stage in a long line of 'appearances'). In this sense, we risk working too much in the dark, apart from the world that has bequeathed to us our objects and methods of study and reflection, and we also operate in a time continuum in which our published work always 'arrives,' in a sense, after we have decided to leave it behind and move on to other things. (I might also add here that this traditional way of doing things also keeps our work sequestered within the academy, and does not allow us to reach a more broadly public audience, which, in my mind, is a real perversion of the term 'humanities.')

We also do our work largely apart from the very peers whom we hope will welcome and even love it when it is 'finished.' Yes, for the kind of work we

do, quiet is required, even long stretches of solitude (because this is when ideas often arrive to us that could never have arrived any other way and also because it's hard to translate medieval Latin when people are milling all around you), but you've got to get outside every now then. And maybe also reflect on the fact that even the supposed inside/outside divide is primarily an illusion.

Take Jansen (again), for example. He claims he likes to work alone, but he works primarily outside – his 'workshop' is on a hill in the suburb of Ypenburg, near Delft, and he conducts most of his tests on the beach where strangers and friends and family, some of whom jump in as assistants, can watch Jansen experiment with his creatures, and his dog, Mr. Murphy, also spends each day with him while he works and can often be glimpsed interacting with the 'beests.' Jansen has allowed a documentary filmmaker, Alexander Schlichter, to follow him around, filming him at his work, for over 10 years, and Schlichter himself even maintains a weblog 'workbook' of his filming of Jansen and his labors.¹⁸ In addition, Jansen maintains a website (<http://www.strandbeest.com>) detailing the history of his work and engineering schemes and also includes a live webcam that allows you to watch him in his 'studio.' Although a highly idiosyncratic character, and by his own definition, an obsessive, his work is completely open in the sense that all of its phases, even including the missteps and mistakes he makes along the way, is shared with the public: those close at home and also those far away, the accidental passer-by as well as the friend, family member, journalist, filmmaker, and those he has never met nor knows anything about (like me). In a very real sense, a sort of community has developed around Jansen's work and in various, small ways, likely impinges upon that work while also broadening its scope of impact.

What, in the final analysis, might be the ultimate value of Jansen's work, I ask myself: that he succeeds in releasing what he calls 'herds' of 'beests' upon the Dutch coastline who will outlive him (and us), or that he has bequeathed to us the visible products of a certain stretch of 'working time' – 21 years as of this writing – in which he has labored *in the open* (both in the sense of working outside but also by sharing his work-in-progress online) on his creatures? For me, the ultimate value is something enabled through both of these things: neither just the creatures themselves (product) nor only the windows upon Jansen's labors over time (process), but rather, an entrance through both of these things entangled with each other to a more ecological vision of the world and our work in it, one in which, well, frankly, everything matters, every last little thing, even the mistakes and the trash. Indeed, Jansen speaks as lovingly of the individual PVC tubes as he does about the creatures that emerge from them. World and work are not separate, just as our articles and books could never really be separated from all of the forces (persons, objects, writings, places, etc.) that give rise to them, yet one of the most enduring images of the scholar is the Nietzschean 'overman' who emerges from the solitude of his study with the monograph triumphantly held aloft in one hand, as if it had just sprung from his forehead. And there are rewards for that, of course, but it's just that . . . it's such a terrible lie, not to mention a tragic waste of missed opportunities for a more capacious intellectual fraternity.

So my plea here is for more open forms of scholarship – for working more *in the open*, alongside each other, where we would retain the practical (if even largely fictive) notion that there is such a thing as individual work (which might, on certain frustrating days, sustain us with the idea that we have something unique to contribute to larger conversations), but also recognize, and maybe *perform* better, the ways in which our work is always enmeshed with others. Blogging has become an excellent venue for doing just

that and for making more visible the ways in which we always think, not in opposition to, but *with* and *for* each other.

It has been said more than once that while writing on academic weblogs may serve the purpose of airing certain nascent and half-baked ideas and having more casual conversations about our profession and work (and occasionally about the ways in which our professional and personal lives impinge upon each other), that it is not, nevertheless, the place to do ‘real’ or ‘serious’ scholarship, which is supposedly better reserved for venues that incorporate ‘stronger’ and more ‘disciplinary’ forms of anonymous critique and peer review and the oversight of more formal interlocutors. But all scholarship, whether articulated as a still barely digested idea on a blog or presented in tentative digest form at a conference or represented as a more fully fleshed-out argument in a scholarly journal, *is* real scholarship – if, by scholarship, we mean the continual practice of the *craft* of reading and writing in the *company* of like-minded artisans, in order to communicate our work to both specialist and non-specialist audiences, and with the hope that a life devoted to reading, reflection, and writing might contribute to a general flourishing (*eudaimonia*). At the very least, if nothing ever changes because of a scholar’s work, something of beauty has been added to the world, some jewel-like artifact of a mind seeking a path through the thicket of books and history and the world, a remainder for a future Borgesian archive.

I think that academic blogs have played a critical function in creating scholarly communities that would not otherwise exist in a profession in which, traditionally, travel to conferences has afforded the only real opportunities for sharing work with like-minded scholars in one’s field. It can feel excruciatingly lonely working on one’s dissertation or one’s first article or one’s first book and the advice that is sometimes received, to show the work more publicly only when it is beyond reproach, creates a climate of anxiety and dread that is unnecessary. It also seems to fly in the face of one of the purposes of a university: to air and discuss and debate ideas in a free, open-air *agora*, unencumbered by capitalist and other special or proprietary interests, where experimentation, even when it leads to failure, should be encouraged and prized.

We need to learn better how to live in the scholarly Now, and blogs have certainly increased the opportunities for doing that. It takes some extra work, of course, to spend part of each day reading and commenting on blogs and maybe also contributing substantive posts to a weblog now and again, but the payoff is that the small burst of conversation that might occur in the last 30 minutes of a conference session has now been extended beyond the conference itself. And with academic blogs, even when there may not be an endless series of comments for every post that is written, the more important point is that there is a fairly steady readership for many of the best academic blogs and there is no limit (except for personal exhaustion) as to how often one can share one’s thoughts, research-in-progress, drafts of essays, etc. with an ‘open’ public. Blogs help us to make the often messy process of scholarship more visible and connect us with more potential interlocutors, both within and outside of the academy. With traditional academic publishing, one might wait years, from the conception of a work to its completion and then publication in a traditional print venue, before one ‘hears’ or ‘sees’ any kind of reaction to one’s work, and there might be no reaction at all, at least, not one that is palpably articulated, whether in a review or an email. In our profession, you could sit around forever waiting to hear what the impact of your article or book might be, or you could engage in a different sort of professional life altogether – one where the process of thinking and writing alongside others in the open, where anyone might wander by and offer a provocation or new path to further thought, and where you can also count on

your closest colleagues and peers to drop in and lend a hand, might lead to a thickening of the possibilities of our intellectual *affiliations* as well as to the general well-being of the profession of medieval studies.

There may be more value in thinking and ‘working through’ our scholarship online, in an environment that promotes and invites democratic, catholic, and convivial support, as well as the accidental tourist and silent voyeur, than there is in the traditional ‘finished product’: the article or the book that may land with a thud and nothing else (nothing that can be immediately visibly measured, anyway, which is why scholars often content themselves with the adage that their real success always lies in a future out of their reach). At the very least, blogs provide a space for the sustenance of those of us who spend many hours alone in our studies and who may wish for a greater ‘company’ during these times – ‘company,’ moreover, that also often serves as an important aid in the critical review of our work. And for what it’s worth, academic blogs also often provide voluble appreciation of ‘finished products’ that otherwise would go unnoticed, since the communities invested in blogs are typically invested as well in assessing and celebrating their affiliates’ individual ‘products,’ whatever they might be. I would also add here that academic blogs also allow a rare glimpse of intellectuals ‘at work,’ which means that blogs serve an important mentorship function in the field as well, while also demystifying scholarly labors.

Similar to Theo Jansen, there’s a bit of magical thinking at play in our work. We labor most of our lives at a form of writing that isn’t likely to live much beyond our time and which may not even serve a distinct practical purpose, but is thought-provoking, nevertheless. We make things, and we hope that others will appreciate them, be moved and affected by them, perhaps even think differently as a result, and we also believe that what we make is somehow ‘alive’: words last, we tell ourselves, and keep ‘talking’ long after we’re gone. But thanks to global warming, giant asteroid belts, the threat of viral pandemics, the continued production of nuclear arms, humans’ seemingly endless propensity for hatred and war, and the like, I gave up on the hereafter a long time ago. Jansen may find some hope in imagining his creatures living on after him, but consider this: when he first decided to build them as a means for dealing with the dune erosion problem on the Holland coast, he decided he would devote 1 year to the project, and that was 21 years ago. Thanks to the generosity of Dutch government subsidies for artists, among other benefactors, Jansen has been with his creatures every day since 1990, indicating to me that this is one hell of a love affair, one in which Jansen seeks a more *immediate* relation than could be served by posterity. In relation to Jansen and his ‘beests,’ but also to the ways in which some of us are invested in sharing our work, in all of it stages, on blogs and other online social media, I am reminded of something Cary Howie wrote in his book *Claustrophilia: The Erotics of Enclosure*:

Our dealings with the world . . . are ultimately fumbings, necessary and beautiful, toward an immediacy that is *im-mediate*, in the strongest sense: not beyond mediation but inside it. (9)

We can only get so close to each other (there is always mediation: between you and me, between ourselves and our subjects of study), but what plying our scholarship more openly and publicly on blogs can do for us, at the very least, is to get us deeper into the relations – scholarly and otherwise – that always already inhere *between* us and our work, and between each other (even when those relations might be difficult and not so comfortable). It can help us to see better that when we say we belong to a ‘field’ – like medieval studies – that we share that field with others who work, not necessarily behind closed doors, but *out in the open* alongside us. In this scenario, intellectual property is

communal, and I can't tell where your ideas end and mine begin. To paraphrase Jansen, that's what I call a beautiful symbiosis.

Short Biographies

Karl Steel is assistant professor in the English Department at Brooklyn College, City University of New York and writes on critical animal theory and medieval literature and social practices. He is the author of *How to Make a Human: Animals and Violence in the Middle Ages* (Ohio State University Press, 2011) and has published in *Exemplaria*, *postmedieval*, and *Shakespeare* (Duke 2011), and has co-edited a special issue of *postmedieval* on "The Animal Turn" with Peggy McCracken. He has pieces forthcoming in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous*, *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, and two anthologies with Punctum Books, *Dark Chaucer* and *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral: Ethics and Objects*. Since 2006, he has blogged with Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, Mary Kate Hurley, and Eileen A. Joy at *In the Middle* (<http://www.inthemedievalmiddle.com>). His current research is on dead pets, monstrous whales, feral children, anthropophagous worms, Golden Age vegetarians, and other challenges to human integrity and fantasies of supremacy.

Jeffrey Jerome Cohen is Professor of English and Director of the Medieval and Early Modern Studies Institute at the George Washington University. His research explores what monsters promise; how postcolonial studies, queer theory, postmodernism and post-humanism might help us to better understand the literatures and cultures of the Middle Ages (and might be transformed by that encounter); the limits and the creativity of our taxonomic impulses; the complexities of time when thought outside of progress narratives; and ecotheory. He is the author of three books: *Of Giants: Sex, Monsters and the Middle Ages*; *Medieval Identity Machines*; and *Hybridity, Identity and Monstrosity in Medieval Britain: On Difficult Middles* and the editor of four more. He blogs at *In the Middle* (<http://www.inthemedievalmiddle.com>).

Mary Kate Hurley is completing her Ph.D. at Columbia University. Her dissertation, "Textual Nation: Translation and Community in Medieval England," examines the ways in which translated texts, broadly considered as textual artifacts which relate received narratives, play an active role in the creation of medieval communities that involve religious, ethnic, and proto-nationalist identities. Her other research interests include post-Conquest representations of Anglo-Saxon England in the Middle Ages, monsters, and *Beowulf*.

Eileen A. Joy is Assoc. Professor of English at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, and has published numerous articles on Old and Middle English literature, cultural studies, post/humanisms, embodiment/affect, violence, and ethics. She is the co-editor of *The Postmodern Beowulf* (2007) and *Cultural Studies of the Modern Middle Ages* (2007), as well as the co-editor of *postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies*, the Lead Ingenitor of the BABEL Working Group, and the Director of punctum books: spontaneous acts of scholarly combustion.

Notes

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¹ My first post, on September 19, 2006, was a reading of the *Testamentum Porcelli* (Steel 2006), which established my usual method of short posts on rare or strange medieval texts.

² On the ephemerality of material on the Internet, see Jarrett 2009.

³ Lest this seem like a strawman attack, a April 11, 2012 Google search for this phrase yields 1730 hits, not many perhaps, but still an unusually large number for an exact phrase. For the differences in openness, formatting, and style between blogs and other electronic networks of scholars, such as Listservs, see Cohen 2010 31–33.

⁴ An ambitious guide for how this might be done appears online in Hallett. So far as I can determine, nothing of the sort has ever been done for a medieval conference.

⁵ I thank this commenter and others who engaged with me in the article's online draft: my co-bloggers, several other anonymous and semi-anonymous commenters, and Rick Godden, Jonathan Jarrett, Steve Mentz, and Robert Stanton.

⁶ See for example Cohen 2010, as well as the blog "In the Middle", www.inthemedievalmiddle.com.

⁷ See the reflections here: <http://www.inthemedievalmiddle.com/2010/07/blogging-askew-or-some-such.html>

⁸ Professor Siskin's M.A. Seminar, "Digital Retroaction," provided an introduction to literary study at the graduate level that challenged almost every boundary of what that study might be thought to entail. Although he taught this course at Columbia University, he is currently a member of the English department at New York University.

⁹ Professor Dinshaw was kind enough to allow me to attend her class under the auspices of the New York City Inter-University Doctoral Consortium. She is a professor of English and Social and Cultural Analysis at New York University.

¹⁰ Looking back, I didn't actually blog a lot about the reading I did for my doctoral exams. One could read this as an early sign of the anxiety that blogging my dissertation – or rather, trying to blog it – would produce.

¹¹ I'll admit that I don't know quite what that term means in the context of ideas. On one level, I'd imagine it's a latent fear of having an idea stolen – being "scooped," so to speak. But that term suggests a kind of competition for ideas in which getting to an idea *first* is all that matters, devaluing the process by which an idea becomes one's own, the process that inevitably changes the idea itself as one writes. However, there is another level of anxiety here as well, that an experiment might not be taken as such, that my words and ideas will be judged as though they are already finished rather than in process, and as a result be found lacking.

¹² My undergraduate thesis advisor is Dr. Gillian Overing, from Wake Forest University. In part, my understanding of what being an academic means is due to the spirit of experimentation and generosity I found in both her work and her guidance as an advisor as she helped me make the transition from undergraduate study to graduate school.

¹³ Fradenburg elaborates further, "confabulation is a way that people who are suffering some deficits make use of their surviving resources to make sense of their experience (and thus make the experience available in some fashion to memory, hope and dream). I think confabulation makes us nervous because it suggests how provisional all of our explanations are, and how much they rest on implicit beliefs about the situations we're in. Above all the point is that confabulation is relational – it happens when a story or explanation is solicited by an other, or when the confabulator is in a situation in which such a story or explanation would enhance sociality It's a way of continuing to use speech to sustain a relationship with others" (personal correspondence, April 12, 2012). See also Fradenburg 2011.

¹⁴ Go here for videos of Jansen's sculptures in motion: http://www.strandbeest.com/film_videos.php.

¹⁵ See Bennett 2010 1–19.

¹⁶ See <http://www.strandbeest.com/contact.php>.

¹⁷ See, for example, Clark 2003 on distributed cognition.

¹⁸ See, for example, some raw footage clips from June 2009 at <http://vimeo.com/10012330>.

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