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Quirk Shame

THE THEME OF ACADEMIC SHAME in the digital age tends to surface only in relation to the gaudiest of misdemeanors: large-scale plagiarism from Wikipedia, say, or writing pseudonymous reviews of your own book on Amazon; things that can sit comfortably alongside the famous shameful set pieces of predigital campus novels, in other words, from Jim Dixon's drunken lecture on "Merrie England," to the moment Howard Ringbaum wins the "Humiliation Game" by revealing he's never read *Hamlet*.[1]

Smaller moments, by contrast, tend to go unmentioned as no more than the stuff of everyday academic life. How, though, to position instances like those suggested by Elspeth Probyn—the shame of trying and failing to communicate the thrill of a topic to a group of distracted students; the realization that bibliographic skills are no help in carrying out a new administrative role—in relation to more recent realities?[2] Take the overreliance on Wikipedia for a hastily cobbled together lecture on an unfamiliar topic, perhaps, or the overuse of Amazon's "Look inside" feature to try to piece together the gist of a book from a handful of scattered pages, rather than finding the time to get it from a library.

Whether found out or not, what all these moments share is the capacity to pierce the painstakingly constructed carapace of academic expertise, fabricated since graduate school, and worn as second skin during waking hours. Yet so blurred is the boundary between such familiar acts of potential shame and normal scholarly practice that the depth of—or even the need for—shame can become hard to identify.[3] After all, if the right pages are available on Amazon—perhaps skillfully combined with those visible through the "preview" function of Google Books—they are the "real" pages of the "real" book. Similarly, if can students learn how to use Wikipedia responsibly, then academics can too. As an emotion, moreover, shame is paradigmatically subjective: one person's shame at corners cut through online pilfering might

ABSTRACT Although music historians have begun to consider some of the broad implications of large-scale digitization, the shift from traditional library- or archive-based methods of research to speculative Internet text searching remains largely invisible within an unchanged scholarly apparatus of footnotes and bibliographies. As a result, quirky details become easier to find, yet that ease is itself concealed, perhaps, because to admit it might occasion a variety of academic shame.

well be another's relief at relevant information obtained with maximum effi-ciency.[4] And for every caricature of the digital-era humanist as a figure with no greater expertise than anyone else with a wireless connection, there is the image of the specialist database researcher trained in novel methods of gen-erating and interpreting information in ways never before possible.

Away from these extremes, though, the relative invisibility of the changed digital landscape can be striking, with an increased reliance on online resources largely concealed behind an older model of scholarly practice. This raises a variety of questions: can we replicate Georges Lefebvre's "supreme satisfaction of untying the strings on a bundle of papers in the attic of a village *mairie*" when that same bundle is available online? Can archive fever survive outside the archive?[5] Such lines of enquiry quickly shade into something more judgmental: do we deserve the same credit for excavating information without leaving the house, and without facing any of the privations and hardships that have traditionally provided the researcher with fodder for decades of faculty club reminiscence? And in the new world of reliable serendipity governed by word searching, what does it mean for our work when the perfect quirk—the irresistible nugget of historical detail—is never more than a click away?

It seems useful, in this context, to have Wikipedia bump up against the digitized provincial French archive, since it is part of the digital experience that research skills are honed every time we look for anything online. In terms of possible shame, though, there are clearly distinctions to make. The emotion bound up with onscreen photos of that bundle of papers, for instance, would seem closer to nostalgia: a longing for the lost quiddity located within the material objects, as well as in their immediate location, settlement, landscape, region, and nation. Once text-searched, though, that collection is deracinated twice over: first the documents from their original context, and then the detail from the context of the documents. And at that point, we enter the territory of quirk shame.

When I was invited to a conference in Berkeley on nineteenth-century opera and cities a few years ago, I wrote a paper on opera in Calcutta in the 1830s. I'd chosen the topic as a way to kick-start a chapter of a book that I planned to write in the months following the conference, about the first opera troupe to go around the world. I carved out as much time as I could in the weeks beforehand to look at the Calcuttan press in the British Library,[6] and by the time I finished my draft it included, near the end, the following quote, from the March 1837 issue of the *United Service Journal and Naval and Military Magazine*:

The establishment of an opera and of public concerts in Calcutta is of recent date, and only calls for notice as marking an era from whence it is to be hoped we may

date the birth of a permanent and widely-diffused taste for musical entertainments in that remote quarter, and the manifestation of a resolution to support and patronize them on a liberal scale, in a ratio commensurate at least with the sums so profusely lavished on other pursuits and recreations of a far less rational and refined nature. Nor has the mania been confined to Europeans; the natives likewise have been inoculated with a musical ardour. Orthodox Hindûs and Mussulmans may be observed occupying an opera-box, and listening with doubtless unfeigned admiration to the beauties of "Il Barbiere," or "Semiramide," whilst one of the wealthiest and most intelligent of their body actually received lessons in singing from the *basso cantate* [*sic*] of the Italian company.[7]

Except, of course, this wasn't from a paper at the British Library: faced with the vast quantity of densely printed journalistic sources of the period and the short time available to me, I had quickly realized that the serious research for the chapter to come lay in the future and turned instead to Google Books.[8]

After I'd given the paper, one person commented on what an amazing passage this was, and how thrilled I must have been when I found it. And so I had been, sitting in my room in the Hotel Durant, a block from the campus, the day before the conference, trying to figure out my ending. But the nature of that thrill was complicated, in ways that I wish briefly to explore.

To start by stating the obvious, my larger project, which traces the operatic circumnavigation of a small group of singers during the 1820s and '30s, would have been impossible to construct without searchable databases of different kinds. Yet we write at a time when there is no ethical scholarly requirement to distinguish in footnotes between digitized primary materials accessed at home and those read elsewhere. And in the unchanging conventions of the traditional academic footnote, with its refusal to acknowledge the digital derivations of many of its sources, I sense an unwillingness to relinquish the impression of effort that historical research has traditionally required, whether in the miles traveled to reach the distant library, the persuasive skills employed to gain access to a document in a bad state of repair, or the labor of turning the handle of a manually operated microfilm reader.[9] If not quite equivalent to the effort expended in the quest for the holy grail, the scholar's work might at least count as a variety of honest toil to rival a moderately assiduous East India Company writer. Look at me, my Calcuttan footnotes shout: hard evidence of weeks in the British Library, or even perhaps of grant money well spent to track down further sources in the archives and libraries of Calcutta (or rather, Kolkata) itself. Oh, and that quote I just cited? Funnily enough, that came up on Google when I combined the search terms "opera" and "Calcutta" for books published between 1830 and 1840 (see fig. 1).
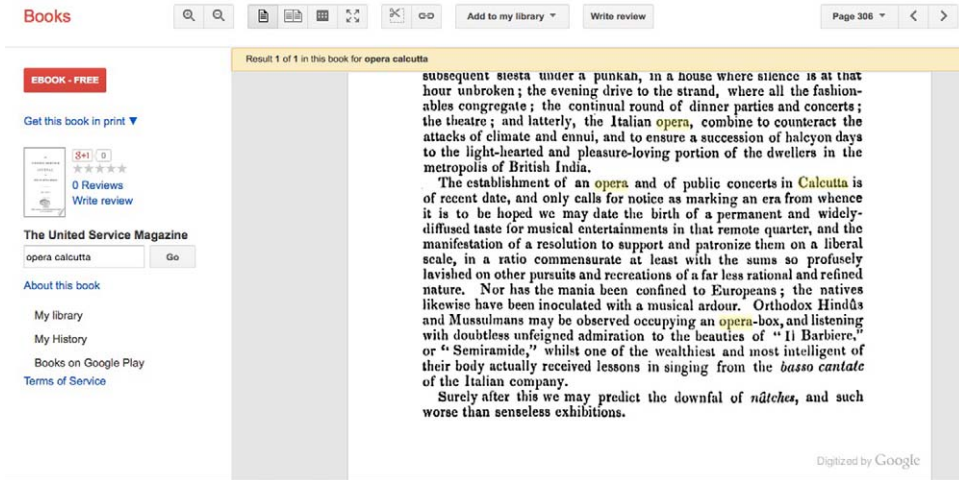
FIGURE 1. Screenshot of Google Books search result using the terms "opera" and "Calcutta." *United Service Journal and Naval and Military Magazine* (March 1837): part 1, 306.
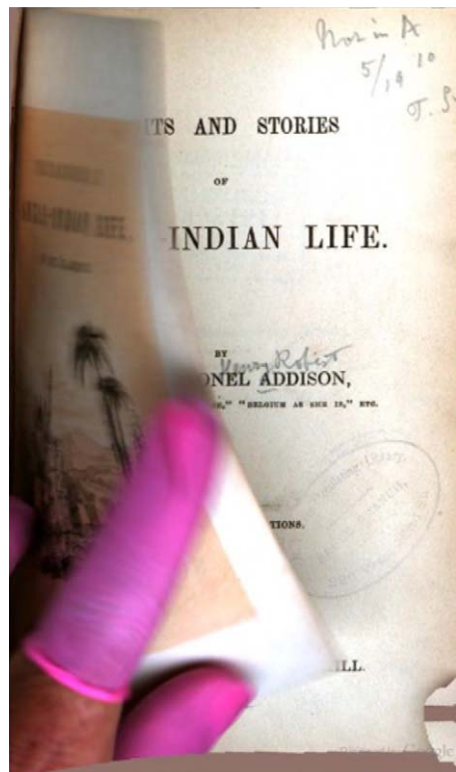

FIGURE 2. Fingers of the "scan-op" as they appear in a Google-digitized e-book: Henry Robert Addison, *Traits and Stories of Anglo-Indian Life* (London, 1858), title page, Hathi Trust Digital Library, http://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=nyp.33433082452479; view=1up;seq=15.
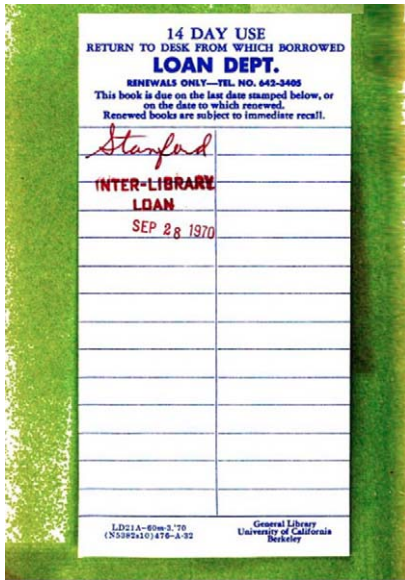
FIGURE 3. Screenshot of borrowing slip at the back of the Google-digitized copy of the *United Service Journal and Naval and Military Magazine* from 1837 that includes the description of the opera in Calcutta.

Still, a good quote is a good quote, and this one can surely be held up to prove the wonders of the searchable archive, as gifted to me by the anonymous, condom-fingered "scan-ops" at Google, whose eerie traces from time to time provide a reminder of the manual labor involved in the company's vast and extraordinarily secretive digitization project, turning the pages so we no longer have to (fig. 2).[10] Here was a military journal published in London that had only a tangential relationship to the press and theatrical life of Calcutta.[11] The digitized copy of the volume from 1837 found on Google, meanwhile, came from none other than the library at UC Berkeley, just minutes away from where I was searching and—thanks to Cal's enthusiastic embrace of the Google Books project—now visible online. And the image of the borrowing slip at the back reveals that—at least until rubber-stamping died out—there was only ever a single request to borrow this copy of the book, from Stanford in 1970 (fig. 3). One might argue that in a case like this, then, the act of discovery, via Google's insatiable photographing, marks the emergence of sources that previously remained thoroughly hidden.

So why, mixed with the thrill of finding this quote, did I also feel a hint of shame? Perhaps my discomfort simply marks a transitional stage, having come of age as a scholar in one research environment and entered post-doctoral life in another; perhaps the hard-won quirk will only temporarily seem more deserving of attention than the Googled quirk. Either that, or the onward march of digitization will increase the attraction of the hard-to-access archive, and we will instead award ever greater scholarly value to any

collections that fall outside the digital realm, even while cursing them for their unwillingness to satisfy current scholarly needs.

I would argue, though, that such mixed feelings go beyond an ascetic resistance to the digital world as a place whose existence, in the words of Tim Hitchcock, brings "the happy realization that we no longer need to leave our warm desks on a cold winter's day" (or our air-conditioned hotel rooms on a warm fall day).[12] After all, the limitations of keyword searching have recently—if belatedly—come into sharp focus.[13] To recap: whatever the treasures they reveal, digital collections like Google Books give an impression of completeness that risks leaving large bodies of nondigitized materials still more untouched. The mechanics of the search are also problematic: as Hitchcock points out, the use of Optical Character Recognition (OCR) to render scanned texts searchable yields an "overall word accuracy rate" for the Burney Collection of Eighteenth Century Newspapers of 65 per cent, dropping to 48.4 per cent when looking at "significant words" of the sort that would be most likely to be used, with the result that:

While we think we are searching newspapers, we are actually searching markedly inaccurate representations of text, hidden behind a poor quality image. And even more damning, by citing a hard copy of the original we are then refusing to document our research path, making it difficult for others to critique the process.[14]

Just as significantly, as Ted Underwood has observed in this journal, text searching "confirm[s] almost any thesis you bring to it," while also serving to filter out alternative ideas.[15] Google, meanwhile, prioritizes search results based on your geographical location and your previous search history by default, in a way that leads the researcher back to material used before. In such an environment, Peter Mandler's appeal to cultural historians of a decade ago to pay attention to a text's "throw"—that is, its influence within wider discourses—seems at once more pertinent and less likely than ever.[16]

My Google-generated quote, for example, defers all questions of throw through its quirky vividness. Shiny yet normative, it does exactly what it needs to do: it provides the information that this sort of research is meant to unearth. At the same time, it replicates a version of the easy thrill that might well have been aimed for by the article's own author: fancy that, nineteenth-century Italian opera, but with Hindus and Muslims in the audience!

Not that we would allow ourselves such a naive response; fascinating evidence, we might say instead, of Italian opera working within a colonial context, while noting the volumes spoken by casting Calcutta as a "remote quarter," along with that winking reference to the "doubtless unfeigned admiration" of the natives. Still, how liberating to escape the familiar dynamics of a European audience listening to European art music, even while talking

about the same old operas, just away from the same old places, and without any discomfort about its elite and canonical status: operatic ethnomusicology, in other words; India, but with a bel canto soundtrack. No matter the equally unfathomable experiences of the English community at the theater in Calcutta; or the role of Italian opera as profoundly exotic within a colonial context. No matter the reality, barely visible in my quoted passage, of the particular historical moment in which the attendance of rich British and Bengali merchants at the same theater was in many ways entirely unsurprising, and when the particular merchant who received singing lessons from one of the troupe's basses was Dwarkanath Tagore (grandfather of Rabindranath), the same who in 1834 had bought the Calcutta theater to protect it from bankruptcy. Feel, instead, the familiar frisson of staging another encounter between the European art-music self and its well-established Other.

I've moved in conclusion, I realize, from confession to accusation, freely—and no doubt unfairly—implicating the audience who heard my original conference paper into my sense of shame. I've moved, too, from a broadly cultural historical position to something more disciplinary: music historians, after all, have tended to hang on harder than many to their favored repertories, and to seek novelty in the construction of new contexts around them.[17] My guess would be, though, that quirk shame knows no disciplinary boundaries, defined only by ease of discovery and the ability both to tickle the audience's fancy and to fulfill their expectations.

The risk—a risk that itself courts shame—is, then, that people may not be as engaged by the stories developed after months of research as by the material thrown up by some quick Googling. So while it seems useful to reflect on the techniques, possibilities, and ethics of digital research, the greater challenge might ultimately be to confound the desires of the digitally saturated audience, in an effort to avoid a sort of music history that might sometimes be quirkier than that told a generation ago, but that may end up no less predetermined. In Probyn's terms, this would mean casting aside one form of shame, generated by the easy pickings of the contextless original quote, and embracing another, in trying to communicate the interest of a story made possible by electronic resources, yet not conditioned by them; resisting the lure of the quirk, one click at a time.

Notes

1. On the wider context of these widely cherished episodes (from Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim* and David Lodge's *Small World,* respectively), see Elaine Showalter, *Faculty Towers: The Academic Novel and Its Discontents* (Oxford, 2005).
2. Elspeth Probyn, *Blush: Faces of Shame* (Sydney, 2005), 130–31.

3. Pierre Bayard's solution, based on the example of Lodge's Ringbaum, is explained in a chapter entitled "Not Being Ashamed" in his surprise bestseller, *How to Talk About Books You Haven't Read* (London, 2007), though only the first and last pages are available on Amazon.

4. For a recent philosophical account of the nature of shame, see Julien A. Deonna, Raffaele Rodogno, and Fabrice Teroni, *In Defense of Shame: The Faces of an Emotion* (Oxford, 2012).

5. As a fine example of the sort of lattice of footnoted information often impossible to recreate within the world of electronic searching (see note 9), Georges Lefebvre's description is cited by Richard Cobb, in an article reprinted in *A Second Identity: Essays on France and French History* (Oxford, 1969), 92, which is then quoted by Carolyn Steedman, in *Dust* (Manchester, 2001), 72, by way of a review of Cobb's book by Douglas Johnson. Steedman's exploration in *Dust* of the history and implications of "real" archive fever (largely decoupled from Jacques Derrida's famous essay), meanwhile, dwells at some length on the centrality of the archive as physical presence.

6. The British Library (BL) allows access to no hard copies of Indian journals from this period, and those in pursuit of archival nostalgia are better served in Kolkata itself. At the Esplanade Reading Room, an annex of the National Library of India, an employee with a brush circulates intermittently around the single large table, sweeping fragments of old newspapers onto the floor as they disintegrate with each turn of the page. The best the BL can offer, by contrast, are microfilm readers in the African and Asian Studies Reading Room, where the collected directories, almanacs, and registers of the colonial administration at least stand within easy reach on the surrounding bookshelves.

7. "Barbarossa," "Sketches of Military Life by a King's Officer," *United Service Journal and Naval and Military Magazine* (March 1837): 306.

8. The following address replicates my own search: https://books.google.com/books?id=LvgbAQAAIAAJ&pg=PA306&dq=opera+calcutta&hl=en&sa=X&ei=TRaLVfS3DIm4-QG49ICQBg&ved=0CC0Q6AEwAw#v=onepage&q=opera%20calcutta&f=false.

9. On the potentially profound implications of this gap between digital searching and footnoting, see Tim Hitchcock, "Confronting the Digital, Or How Academic History Writing Lost the Plot," *Cultural and Social History* 10, no. 1 (2013): 9–23. Detailed guidance for distinguishing between web and print sources is provided in the most recent editions of both the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* and *The Chicago Manual of Style*, though this has not yet led to greater transparency about use of historical online sources in most musicological writing (and doesn't even try to show the pathway to a source, for instance via speculative keyword searching).

10. A representative selection of scan-ops' fingers can be found by typing "Google Books Fingers" into Google Images. A book of Google finger images, including the one shown in fig. 2, was also put together in 2009 by Benjamin Shaykin; see benjaminshaykin.com/Google-Hands. A deeply unsettling account of both the secrecy and the working conditions within the Google Books project, meanwhile, is provided in Andrew Norman Wilson's video "Workers Leaving the Googleplex" (2011), www.andrewnormanwilson.com/WorkersGoogleplex.html.

11. As it happens, the journal is even listed on the British Library website as a journal that is particularly hard to track down: British Library, Help for Researchers, www.bl.uk/reshelp/findhelprestype/journals/ahdifficultp/u/diffperu.html.

12. Hitchcock, "Confronting the Digital," 11.

13. In addition to the literature cited in other notes, see, among other things, Andrew Prescott, "I'd Rather Be a Librarian: A Response to Tim Hitchcock 'Confronting the Digital,'" *Cultural and Social History* 11, no. 3 (2014): 335–41; the essays in Toni Weller, ed., *History in the Digital Age* (London, 2013); and the special forum, "Search," in *Representations* 127 (Summer 2014), which includes the essay by Ted Underwood cited later in this essay.
14. Hitchcock, "Confronting the Digital," 14. It should be added that a more recent summary of OCR success for digitized newspapers came out at around 80 percent, though to improve on that figure would involve time-consuming intervention: Carolyn Strange et al., "Mining for the Meanings of a Murder: The Impact of OCR Quality on the Use of Digitized Historical Newspapers," *Digital Humanities Quarterly* 8, no. 1 (2014), http://digitalhumanities.org/dhq/vol/8/1/000168/000168.html. The OCR version of any book digitized by Google is available through the "Plain Text" setting; the rendition of my quote from the *United Service Journal* is fairly accurate, given the clear type of the original, though the word "Hindus" is rendered in ways that would be impossible to discover through a search.
15. Ted Underwood, "Theorizing Research Practices We Forgot to Theorize Twenty Years Ago," *Representations* 127 (Summer 2014): 66.
16. Peter Mandler, "The Problem with Cultural History," *Cultural and Social History* 1, no. 1 (2004): 94–117.
17. Not all music historians share this tendency, of course, as was famously played out in the self-consciously foundational debates that marked the competition during the early 1990s to define the "new musicology" and that may also have witnessed the birth of the quirk; see *Wikipedia*, s.v. "New musicology," en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_musicology.