

OPENING REMARKS

By Dorry Noyes

Welcome to "Bodies in Virtual Space: Bridging Distance in Arts and Humanities Methods and Practices," a Methods Conversation organized by the Global Arts and Humanities Discovery Theme — the GAHDT. My name is Dorothy Noyes — I'm Professor in the Departments of English and Comparative Studies and I'm the Humanities Faculty Fellow of the Methods and Practices Amplifier of the GAHDT. The purpose of the Amplifier is to create bridging conversations across the GAHDT's funded projects and the division and the university to foster exchange and collaboration in addressing shared challenges.

This conversation was planned when the challenges posed to our teaching and research by the COVID-19 pandemic were uppermost in our minds. Today, that moment feels like a long time ago. So, there's a new inflection to the conversation we'll be having now, and there is a new urgency around our issues: how to hold inclusive conversations across digital divides and differential vulnerabilities, how to keep the body present — all bodies present — and how, collaboratively, to imagine and perform new possibilities under conditions of stress and constraint.

When the university shut down in March and virtual teaching and social distancing were imposed, there came into view a lot of things that often get taken for granted in the methods and practices of the arts and humanities, and most notably, the co-presence of bodies in physical space. For all the theorizing we have done on the body in recent years, and for all the theorizing of the virtual, many of us still found ourselves at a loss. How can the performing arts happen without the gestural cues and "mutual tuning-in" of co-present bodies oriented towards one another in shared time and space? How can we make a common rhythm across the delays and hiccups of Zoom? How can an ethnographer approach a community unobtrusively, and slowly and humbly learn to live by its rules? How can we engage a classroom without eye contact? How can we build ethical partnerships from the university, with all its technological affordances for life going forward, with communities facing existential problems in immediate space? When you cannot situate the others around you, you feel trapped as if alone on a proscenium stage looking into darkness — or worse, looking at the strangeness of your own face from the laptop camera.

All of you have expended immense effort and real ingenuity in addressing these practical challenges. Still, at the personal level, feelings of loss have been unavoidable. Seniors missing their final semester, grad students losing their fieldwork or their recital, colleagues losing hard-won sabbatical travel, teachers missing relaxed interaction in their classes, and all of this in a context of material losses of jobs, homes, job security and visible prospects for the future. These larger concerns play into our immediate frustration with trying to make music over Zoom.

Many of you have had the experience of participating in virtual religious services during this period. Valiant efforts are being made to create virtual architecture, congregant participation, musical preludes, even singing, followed of course by an awkward virtual coffee hour. To be sure, smells-and-bells Episcopalians, of whom I'm one, have been able to do nothing about the incense. More importantly, the Diocese of Southern Ohio has determined that not only congregations but the clergy will do without communion during its ongoing period of social distancing. The sacrament requires co-present bodies. The Bishop has had some thoughtful things to say about this: he asks the faithful to understand the quarantine as a prolonged version of Lent, a voluntary surrender of valued practices that creates an opportunity for reflection.

It has worked well for me to transfer this conception to my professional life. As a tenured professor with a long career behind me, I've taken for granted a rich collection of inputs into my thinking: travel, fieldwork, conferences, museums, concerts, visiting scholars, meals with students, libraries, conversations in the hallway. It's fair to say that my relation to scholarship has become consumerist. Accordingly, a period of

forced austerity has made me consider my expenditure of scholarly resources as well as the value and possibilities of everything I still have.

But for our students and others it's not possible to think of this period as simply hitting the pause button. The liminal moment may not lead back to anything like structure in their lives. And here is where the most dangerous possibility of loss arises as we commune in virtual space.

In my home discipline of folklore studies, the concepts of performance and tradition have both been defined as assumptions of responsibility. The performer invites the reflective judgments of the audience. The one who hands down and the one who accepts a valued tradition assume joint responsibility for its passing into the future. The guarantors of responsible behavior are the community members who are co-present in ongoing interactional space, those to whom actors are answerable.

Such interactional space does not have to be physical, and the vibrant life of once-oral traditions on the internet has brought folklore studies itself back to life. Still, today's transmission of messages in virtual space is, shall we say, not consistently governed by any collaboratively generated ethic of responsibility. When the face of the other is not consistently present in a shared lifeworld, responsibility is bound to erode. And answerability is not guaranteed when some of us have the luxury of turning off the screen. Today the differential vulnerability of bodies in physical space - to both fast and slow violence — is the most urgent issue we face as a society. Our virtual communications can't lose sight of the material fact.

We have seven presenters today, involved in multiple GAHDT projects, and after they introduce themselves each of them will be making a short presentation on the kinds of adjustments they have made to their practice post-COVID. We'll ask them to respond briefly to one another, and then give the group some questions from the audience - then wrap up with some thoughts from my colleague Susan Van Pelt Petry on where things go from here.

Some housekeeping reminders:

- To limit your screen view to the speakers, please go to your camera icon, select "Video Settings" from the menu, and then select Hide non-video participants.
- Select "Gallery View."
- Please remember to mute your mic and turn off your camera.
- We have 91 registered participants and limited time, so instead of a live Q&A, we chose to collate questions pre-submitted by the registrants.
- At the same time, we have a lot of expertise in this virtual room. So please use the "Chat" function to add comments and resources for further consideration. We will save the "Chat" and make it available along with the recording of the event.

I now turn to my colleague Susan Van Pelt Petry, who has done the heavy lifting in planning this event along with our stellar designer Breanne LeJeune and Program Manager Puja Batra-Wells. - we give them our earnest thanks.