the changing profession

Divination

ELAINE FREEDGOOD

What if in the final
minutes of your heavying
descending

the landing strip kept lying
changing you back
into the air the way a white

backs away in anger when you approach with the directions
you've been asked?
—Ed Roberson, "The Aerialist Narratives"

The fate of the nation is foretold in the arcs of birds, in the flight patterns of the ruling class, in the strip of runway hard to see in the fog. Only through the scrutiny of all such lines will our fates grow clear.
—Joseph Donahue, "Metaphysical Shivers: Reading Ed Roberson"

WALTER BENJAMIN, IN "ON THE MIMETIC FACULTY," PLACED DIVINATION—THE READING OF "WHAT HAS NEVER BEEN WRITTEN"—IN THE ancient past and mourned the "liquidation of magic" engendered by the advent of runes, hieroglyphs, and other forms of written language (336). Alphabets, he argued, ruin our ability to read the sky, entrails, or dances. The poet and critic Joseph Donahue, reading Ed Roberson about one hundred years later, argues that divination is our only hope: there are all kinds of lines we must try to understand, those of poetry being only one kind. Roberson writes in sculptural lines about historical, social, and geographic lines: the Mason-Dixon, Jim Crow, "genealogies, bullet trajectories, apartheid, chalk outlines on the ground" (Donahue 701). A stanza break thematizes this need for divination at the level of form: "a white" dangles, only clarified as human in the following stanza (Roberson 79). An angry white human backing away from a line you've crossed, a line you've been asked to cross, or so you thought. Lines shift; they lie about the way they lie. The landing strip might disappear in fog, and so might

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you. The reading of such lines requires additional data, a search, or what we call, somewhat oddly, research.

Scrutinizing the specifics of such aerodynamic problems is possible now. Even "the flight patterns of the ruling class" need not be a conceit, metaphor, or gesture (Donahue 701). We can investigate those patterns by accessing the massive amount of data stored, variously and arbitrarily, on the Web. Our attempt to make sense of data we find will be a kind of divination: our access to them is multiply contingent because multiply controlled. The lighthearted feeling that the idea of random knowledge in cyberspace used to evoke in us has been replaced by a more canny sense of how the data that we once thought of as floating around like sheets of paper on a breeze can be snagged by our keywords and reeled in to our screens for perusal and organization. Nonetheless, most of us do not, and cannot, analyze the mediations that obtain between us and our information, the metaphoric gates and loops and hoops we pass through when we press Search or Go or Enter. We pass through

> [o]bligatory passage points within software-sorting systems [that] involve a burgeoning array of subscriptions, passwords, service entitlements, physical and virtual access control points, electrically surveilled passage points and transaction systems, automated, biometric judgments and normative databases—all of which are continuously enacted and sustained through code and computerized systems based on machine-readable inputs. (Graham 564)

We search, many of us, with no sense of how the material we seek has been presorted and arranged by algorithms that are, for me at least, illegible lines of numbers and symbols. "[T]he algorithms that support . . . choices, simulations, orderings and classifications . . . remain completely and utterly unscrutinized" (567). Such declarations have become so common that I am impatiently waiting for the algorithmic scrutinizers to arrive. Only recently did I learn about stopwords, data cleaning, the politics of owning information and setting bandwidths, and the ways in which our searchings, and therefore the readings our searchings produce, are full of human and machine error. Stopwords are the words that a search engine doesn't let you search because they occur too often. *JSTOR*'s stopwords, for example, include *about*, *if*, *many*, and *well*. Software "offers us an imaginary relationship to our hardware" (Chun) and makes all kinds of inscrutable choices for us, even as it convinces us that its desktop, its files, and the crumpled paper in its wastebasket are the same as tangible ones. The idea of discourse in its Foucauldian sense almost brings on a warm, nostalgic feeling: one could start to get a handle on it, after all. But most of us cannot begin to scrutinize the order, the disorder, of digital information as it now exists. We access it almost as we would throw the *I ching* or read the liver of a sacrificial goat. Our information is not only partial, it is also random and the result of endless combinations of choices made by someone and something else. We are interpreting, divining, and guessing much of the way, and it is tough to remember or consider what may be missing, cleaned away, excluded as noise, or never archived at all. So that reading the archive beyond our digital reach—in memory, scars, buildings, ports, print, and inherited tics and traumas that manifest themselves in arcane forms of slow or fast violence—seems almost a logical procedure, full of system and sequence, sense and good sorting.

I want to celebrate our digital divinations partially. "Voluminous databases contain hidden knowledge," Kenneth Cory argues (60), partly because their randomness or arbitrariness can produce knowledge. The *Arrowsmith* search engine, for example, allowed a nonmedical researcher to find medically significant correlations between magnesium and migraine and between fish oil and Raynaud's

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disease. Carole Palmer describes the *Arrowsmith* process as one that brings together "non-interactive literatures . . . that are, ideally, only connected in implicit intellectual space" (243). Literary analogs to such research seem endless. Thinking back, I would describe the method I used in *The Ideas in Things* as a kind of algorithmic divination in which the word *mahogany*, combined with *slavery*, *Jamaica*, *Madeira*, and *nineteenth century* and plugged into *JSTOR*, *Project Muse*, or *ProQuest*, revealed a kind of history and geography of a wood, which I connected to deforestation, cash crops, and plantation slavery in the skeleton of *Jane Eyre*. In my chapter on that novel, I brought together the noninteractive literatures of furniture design, forestry, and oenology; Victorian memoirs of Madeira; cultural criticism of the Caribbean tourist industry; literary criticism; and a handy book simply entitled *Wood*. Without keyword searching in voluminous databases, I could never have written *The Ideas in Things*. For this essay, I started by simply plugging *divination* into *JSTOR* and *Project Muse*. I read about ancient Greek entrail reading and came up with Donahue's reading of Roberson, which led me to Roberson's poetry for the first time. I then entered *logarithm* in *Project Muse* and found an article by Craig Dworkin that discusses some of the contemporary poetry I discuss in the following paragraph. I did a Boolean search for *divination* and *logarithm* in *ProQuest Central* and read articles on a tarot CD-ROM, Bangladeshi dialogical divination, African math, and the most recent stock market crash. *Politics* and *algorithm* lead me to the critical work in software studies by Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, which launched my thinking about code and about my inability to think about it very well.

Such searches may interrupt the way in which "interactive media ask us to identify with someone else's mental structure" (Manovich 61), as well as all the ways in which software sorting constructs our knowledge without our knowing it has done so. Interfaces, Lev Manovich points out, present us with metaphors of old media (a video play button on a computer screen feels like and works like the play button on our old-school DVD player), creating imaginary relations to processes that we don't see. Similarly, databases and search engines are organized according to categories and epistemologies that emanate from information scientists who may or may not be sensitive to the nuances of the languages in all the disciplines they divide (Bowker and Star). To break from this largely invisible user passivity, we might follow the lead of several conceptual writers whose work tries to preserve or reproduce our idealized sense of the random, nonsequential quality of Internet data and who often reuse found text. Judith Goldman's "Dicktee" constructs a poem out of every word in *Moby-Dick* beginning with *un-*. The third stanza begins, "unexpectedly, underjawed, unsavory, unicorn, unicornism, unicorn, uncertain, uncouth, unfinished, uncompleted, under, under" (51). Dan Farrell's *The Inkblot Record* is an alphabetical list of responses to Rorschach tests: "A foot. A formal garden in spring with an iron fence at the end, two banks of pink azaleas. A fountain spray, like water shooting. A fraternity paddle. A giant" (5). These texts disorder the order of information and ask us to think about the differences among data; information; knowledge; and the location, source, and construction of meaning. As we read the disarticulated words "uncouth, unfinished, uncompleted, under, under," surely we can, if we choose, make a considerable range of meanings out of all this unness. Is something being undone or set free? Goldman's epigraph from W. V. Quine suggests that it is: "un," Quine writes, "carries an air of liberation" (qtd. in Goldman 50). Similarly, Farrell's disarticulation of words from ink blots sets us free to imagine the blots and to separate ourselves from the blots on our minds, the way we presee and don't see certain shapes and

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images because they will always already be a paddle, a foot, or an elaborate scene with specific shrubs and fences that can be moved only by removal from their context. This is the kind of writing that Fredric Jameson rejects in *Postmodernism* when he chastises Bob Perelman's poem "China" for lacking a referent (i.e., China [30]), but it reminds us of the many stages of our removal from the referent and how they might be enacted, infused with meaning, and read—interpreted.

What would research based on these recent writing practices entail? Perhaps more gaming with keywords, more use of databases that are not appropriate to the subject, more attempts at manifesting "implicit intellectual space"—or even thinking about what that might be. Voluminous databases make practicable the assemblage of discourses that only many hands and minds could assemble from print. Imagine entering *pain* or *artifact* or *evidence* in a selection of databases including, let's say, *Medline*, *Labordoc*, *Witchcraft in Europe and America*, *Black Drama*, *Empire Online*, *People's Daily*, *Encyclopedia of Food and Culture*, and *Latin American Women Writers*. The results would not form an argument but would suggest a map of one; we can thus take ourselves on routes we do not already know.

Reading undertaken with the help of digital research is algorithmic divination. "Divination," anthropologists tell us, "is a genre of interpretive discourse" (Wilce 190). "Viewed literally, divination is a process for obtaining information which is (typically) unavailable by ordinary means, that is, which cannot be gotten by the usual techniques of indigenous practical epistemology, such as seeing, hearing, being told by another person—the commonplace categories of evidential coding systems" (John Dubois, qtd. in Wilce 190). Reading literature is always in this sense divinatory. Interpreting it with digital assistance adds another layer of uncertain data, of complicated information that may or may not constitute new knowledge. It is a matter of reading again, of scrutinizing all the kinds of lines that one can read and thinking about the lines that underlie reading now.

I want to conclude by returning to Roberson's "The Aerialist Narratives" and *JSTOR*'s stopwords. In chapter 2, part 2, we are again in motion, "stepping through I / mean getting on a train / plane a subway," and this transit, this sequence, is related to sequences of thought:

> each word said
> then not said there is that
> Then there is this created limit
> not what is hidden by that us as
> horizon but what we hide
> with eyes open inside (100)

The first two lines of this stanza are almost entirely stopwords: unfindable by the technique that comes most readily to our fingertips, like the words mentioned, which are said and then not said. "[T]here is that / Then there is this" describes a continuous, unspecified present of what is available now, and now, and now. Words that cannot be searched for may give a tense new meaning to research: *re-search*. Will we be able to find again what we stumbled over once? What will we read in the next now? I want to end with a sense of the limits and losses of digital information and the eyes that watch from inside our machines. Stopwords might be a figure for archival loss, for inadequate storage, for the lack of access to all kinds of knowledge by all kinds of people everywhere, for our inability to retrieve certain data because their language accords with protocols and procedures we cannot always divine.

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