**The Scale of Research Has Already Changed**

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As I look back over the last decade of digital scholarship in theatre, dance, and performance, many of the same folks I first met in this small domain are now doing even more nuanced and interesting versions of things they have been doing previously. And yet it seems that there has not been a major sea change in terms of recentering digital methods in performance scholarship or training up a new generation of scholars, particularly with regard to the areas of research that are working toward “analysis”—to use the language of Sarah Bay-Cheng’s helpful 2016 division between collection, dissemination, and analysis—or what has been described as “argument-driven digital history.”[[1]](#footnote-1) In this special section, Derek Miller similarly observes the contradiction between the strong, original work being produced in this area and the lack of uptake in the broader field.

This situation is surprising, given the ambitious scale of our field’s investment in what Harmony Bench and I are calling in the context of ASTR 2024 “big histories” for tracking change across bodies, generations, and geographies in performance.[[2]](#footnote-2) Data could come to play a critical methodological role in such recalibration as performance scholars increasingly advocate to look beyond the individual artist or moment, from repetition as method to think intergenerationally, to transnational constellations of social movement, to the more-than-human scales of performance.[[3]](#footnote-3) It is also surprising given that performance scholars are relying on greater amounts of material that are made available through digital tools and platforms. Here, I am thinking about everything ranging from the “crude digitization” of scholarly para-archives that now haunt so many collections to the “abundance” of born-digital and even newly digitized materials that are changing the practice of history. Ian Milligan posits that the same modest standards of evidence are just not enough in the face of such masses of information.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Working ethically and critically with data increases more than the individual scholar’s capacity to scale as well. For a field that is so comfortable with collaborative artistic practices, there is a curious tendency to conduct research in isolation. Just as data-engaged research often relies on meaningful interdisciplinary collaborations, open data protocols enable the sharing of cultivated and curated research materials, providing stronger and more flexible pathways for us to build on the work of colleagues. To accumulate resources and expertise in pursuing projects that cross ever greater spans of time and space. So what hesitations are holding our fields back at this point? How might data methods become normalized to support the necessary project of expanding the scope of our collective storytelling?

1. Bay-Cheng, “Digital Historiography and Performance”; Stephen Robertson and Lincoln A. Mullen, “Arguing with Digital History: Patterns of Historical Interpretation,” *Journal of Social History* 54, no. 4 (2021): 1005-22, https://doi.org/10.31835/ma.2021.01. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Harmony Bench and Kate Elswit, “Big Histories: Experimental Methods for Tracking Change across Bodies, Generations, and Geographies in Performance,” ASTR 2024 Conference Working Sessions, <https://www.astr.org/page/24_working_sessions>. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For example: Soyica Diggs Colbert, Douglas A. Jones, and Shane Vogel, eds. *Race and Performance after Repetition* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020); Marcela A. Fuentes, *Performance Constellations: Networks of Protest and Activism in Latin America* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2019); Lourdes Orozco and Jennifer Parker-Starbuck, eds., *Performing Animality: Animals in Performance Practices* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Eric Mayer-García, “Theorizing Performance Archives through the Critic’s Labor,” *Theatre Survey* 64, no. 3 (2023): 247-70; Ian Milligan, *History in the Age of Abundance? How the Web Is Transforming Historical Research* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)