

Dear Don,

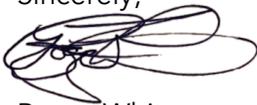
During one of the Marxist Reading Group conferences I attended as part of my graduate school training at the University of Florida, I presented a paper on Blake, Spinoza, and biopolitics. Spinoza scholar Warren Montag was keynoting the conference, and asked several amazing questions. After the panel, he came up to me and wanted to talk. I was honored that he wanted to talk to me, but he quickly turned the conversation back to you. "You know, I had Donald Ault in several undergrad Romantics and theory courses. He really changed my life. I didn't end up working in Blake studies, but everything I do with Spinoza and political theory can be traced back to what I learned from Don. Please say hello for me."

I was reminded immediately of this conversation when Katie Singer asked me about producing a series of Google Hangouts on important retired or emeritus scholars in British Romanticism for *Romantic Circles*. So many people, from a wide variety of fields and disciplines, have been forever changed because of what they learned from you. From the field of Comics Studies, which you basically created to post-structuralist and media-informed Blake Studies — to scholars like Laurie, Stephanie, and Zach who took inspiration from your wide-ranging mind and your generous heart and helped inaugurate Video Game Studies. If nothing else, I hope these letters underscore the breadth and the depth of your contribution as a teacher.

Each of us have provided a set of questions and/or a narrative that may inspire a response from you. We don't expect responses to every question, and we encourage you to respond in the manner that is the most comfortable and reasonable for you. I would suggest scanning the questions and recording a 10-15 minute response that incorporates some of the questions and/or is simply a discussion that goes in whatever direction you want it to take.

Thank you for agreeing to do this. I don't know another professor who is more deserving of a tribute like this than you. I don't know if I speak for everyone here, but learning from you was one of the best experiences of my life. I wouldn't be who I am today without you.

Sincerely,



Roger Whitson  
Assistant Professor of English

Don,

In many ways you paved the way for me as your work and teaching broke barriers I didn't even know had existed long before I entered graduate school. Although my generation of scholars faces their own crises and unique problems, something I *never* experienced was a feeling that my research interests were somehow illegitimate or unworthy of academic study. You and the other faculty I worked with at UF always took for granted the value of my subject matter and I never felt called upon to justify why comics, or videogames, or *any* media form was worthy of consideration. The end result was that it made my research much stronger as I was able to focus my attention around more important questions than proving the intrinsic value of a particular media form or subject

**Question(s):** What was it like to be a comics and media scholar in an era before this was an accepted discipline? What was it like to work in a field that wasn't a field? Can you talk about your early history as a graduate student and professor? What kind of pushback did you receive and who supported you?

Something I wasn't expecting prior to coming to UF (and the United States) was how much the specific character and culture of Gainesville, FL would affect my research and thinking. I feel lucky to have lived there when I did.

**Question:** How did living in Gainesville, Florida for so many years shape your research and practice?

**Related Question:** What were your experiences balancing your academic research with your life as a public intellectual?

There has been a renewed interest in Donald Duck in the age of Donald Trump (e.g., see image attached!)

**Question:** what do you think of this unsettling connection between the two cartoon characters? And more broadly, do you have any thoughts on the connection between nerd culture and the rise of the alt right?

**Question:** You've been such a foundational scholar in comic studies (not to mention visual, games, and media studies), what do you see for the next 100 years of this field?

--Stephanie Boluk



**Donald**



**Donald**

Don,

For some time critical work on William Blake was locked into restricted economies—either a formalism or historical determinism. Your own work moves us from restricted economies to a general economy with many different and even incommensurable values and modes of exchange in Blake's work. Can you discuss how you developed a general economy for Blake's work?

Fundamentally interpretation of a text is a question of judgement and judgement too often arrives as a transcendental from the outside. In your close readings of texts, you seem to be looking at meaning arising from immanence. This is particularly true in *Narrative Unbound* which takes on Blake's *Four Zoas* line by line and image by image. Can you discuss the problem of judgement or the role of immanence in your work?

The work of Alfred North Whitehead has made a real comeback in theory over the last decade. Well before Whitehead's *Process and Reality* was cool again, you seemed influenced by Whitehead's method and had us read Whitehead as doctoral students. Can you discuss what it is in Whitehead that influenced your work?

In your classes we explored complexities, antinomies, and incommensurabilities in literary works. It was a lot of labor but I also recall a lot of laughter and humor and astonishment. What is the role of humor for scholarship?

--Ron Broglio

Don,

1. Some have described the most popular fictions of recent years as escapist, but I see more of an obsession with doom and the end of days. From the social darwinist survivalism of Robert Kirkman's *The Walking Dead* and the senseless bloodbaths of George R. Martin's *Game of Thrones* to the gallows humor that surrounds the Trump administration's every scandal and blunder, the theme appears to be "when will it finally end?" When I encountered your concept of counter-apocalyptic resistances in *Narrative Unbound*, it immediately shifted my thinking. The way William Blake's *Four Zoas* resists closure and final meaning isn't just coincident with its seeming brinksmanship with the end of everything, it is of a piece with the apocalypses it subverts. I see this now in false promise of inevitable doom in fiction, and with the potential and actual disasters of the geopolitical sphere. It's not that terrible things do not happen (*The Four Zoas* is full of terror and wonder, and so is everyday life) it is that these things are incapable of bringing about "The End" because "The End" is a fiction of control. When you were working on *Narrative Unbound*, did you see this desire for apocalypse and its subversion in the politics and/or fiction of the time? To what degree, if any, did you see and do you see *The Four Zoas* as an embedded narrative that alters the world (our perceptions of the world) outside it, much as happens in the text when characters in a story being told move into the diegetic level of or alter their storyteller?

2. Your vector analysis of Carl Barks' duck comics reveals complexities hidden by his mostly-regular page layouts, and does so by looking at the page as a surface rather than treating panels as windows into another world. This technique is also useful in looking at software interfaces, including those for games, and breaking down the false dichotomy between interface and "game world" (or interface and content). When did you realize that vector analysis would be a valuable technique in videogame criticism? Have you been surprised to see other ideas of yours applied to "new" media?

3. When you were my doctoral chair, I was struck by the way you could relate to students (graduate and undergraduate) without needing to establish authority over them, and inspire, not coerce, them to do creative, thoughtful work. It's something I find myself working on now, trying to figure out how to teach by inspiring students to do work that they find meaningful, and to not put up any unnecessary barriers between them and myself. Do you have any suggestions for new professors trying to figure out how to understand and relate to their students?

--Tof Eklund

Dear Don,

Roger had suggested that I ask you about media studies and games. My questions below are situated within context for the questions, with the **questions in bold** for reader ease. My questions are inspired by your work, my work with you, and both the realities and legends of your work and its impact.

In thinking about what to ask, I thought about when I first met you. I'd read about your work before graduate school. I wanted to go to graduate school at UF because I wanted to work with you, learning about your work from your website and then hearing stories from a friend at UF, Brian Clevinger ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brian\\_Clevinger](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brian_Clevinger)), who took many classes with you and went on to work in comics.

Once at UF, I went to one of your undergraduate courses and asked if I could sit in, and you—as always—graciously and enthusiastically confirmed, seeming even confused at my asking. In that class, I was amazed, inspired, and intimidated by your knowledge; how could anyone know so much and with such complexity? Students arrived early for your class, lingered late, and followed after you to your office. For each class, you brought and shared physical materials, a computer or two or more with files, and, often enough, a laserdisc player. With flowing media content and forms, I don't know that I ever heard you use the term transmedia. I know we all discussed games, people wrote about games and comics, and games were an inherent and unquestioned part of media studies in your class. In this, you inclusively approached media forms as well as mass/popular and critically acclaimed classics. We know others have pushed against the inclusion of popular forms. **Can you share with us on your thought process for the inclusive approach?**

Informed by your perspective, when I started with game studies, I knew I was entering existing currents flowing across and in the depths of media studies. In class, your daily struggles with technology demonstrated the promise and peril of computers for research and teaching, as you struggled with computers to bring up high-resolution images and videos to share with the class, and the critical need for archives with your own work to create and preserve archives in order to be able to teach and support research. I found my calling in librarianship, a path illuminated by so many, including your work in creating and activating your archives for all of us. In my work within and across different fields, I've found some fields to be particularly generous and generative, seemingly based in a perspective of abundance to the core. This generous and generative abundance is particularly clear to me for Caribbean Studies

librarianship. When I've asked others about this, they've shared that we are together in the work being a calling, and in our interests to share and support each other in that calling. I've also seen this through you and your work, where you strive to support and share with others, and I'm able to recognize the generosity of fields. Your work is inherently interdisciplinary; field building and world expanding. You also approach the work as a mission for the materials and for all of us, demonstrating a profound generosity and love of the materials studied and the community studying, all alive together. **Can you speak to us about what fields and works you have found to be especially generous, or a story of that generosity that was particularly important to you?** This chat evidences your generosity to many fields, and the generosity in many fields and communities with representatives of those fields asking questions here as part of sharing, returning, and expanding generously together.

I've always known you as a curator and a steward of your own archives. But, archives are always alive with their collectors, curators, and archival networks. **Can you share a story of working in another archive that shaped your thinking in building your own archives?**

Before the age of DVRs and YouTube, I've heard stories that you built your archives by running multiple VCRs simultaneously to record films and cartoons, to capture otherwise inaccessible content, to then share in your classes. I'm reminded of the affective experience in game and new media studies with the sound of servers humming at night with flickering of lights, and the sound of game systems arrayed together with equipment for video capture from the consoles with the quiet and loud humming of fans as they run. **What did the VCRs running sound like? What was the affective experience of running so many VCRs? Do you have a story of this to share?**

Your approach to media studies is inclusive of forms and people and always generous and generative, uplifting and connecting others to create community. Your former students have become professionals, including teachers, librarians, and archivists. **What would you wish for us to pass on, engender, and create with our students and colleagues? And, or, what work do you hope to see us, your students specifically or your communities, undertake?**

--Laurie Taylor

Don,

As you know, Roger has invited me and some others to join a conversation with you about teaching, so he's asked us to provide some questions in advance to serve as starting points for conversation. This format is new to me, but as I understand it—and based on Laurie's excellent and thorough example—I figured I'll organize these questions by writing with them with some background first, concluding each with a question in bold.

Following up on one of Laurie's questions, about recording cartoons and whatever else to bring into classes, I was thinking about those experiences and how the process of setting up the SVHS, Beta, or even LaserDisc player lent a bit of mystique to the whole process, so that by the time we got to view for example the "longer" version of Steamboat Willie, its weirdness was so much richer and more vivid than the way my students experience now when I can just pull up a low-quality version on Youtube. I do use the Youtube version because it's so much easier, but even though I build it up and contextualize it, my students rarely seem to experience the shock of the weirdness in the same way I recall so frequently in your seminars. **Is this something you noticed as well? Did you (or would you) use Youtube in your teaching, and if so how did it (or would it) have impacted those classes?**

On a similar note, as I think about the deceptive ubiquity of media, there's a phenomenon I want to call the "media availability fallacy" which is the tendency to incorrectly assume that, for example, because a film is available in Netflix today, it will continue to be there forever and there's no reason for me to own a copy of it. Similarly, things come and go from Youtube, and even when a film exists and is available through these services, we may find that neither will work in our classrooms for various technical or legal reasons. **Should we be filling up hard drives with high-resolution, uncompressed copies of the cartoons and films we find useful in our classes?**

As I prepared these questions, I thought back to some experiences in your seminars. In one that I recalled — and probably some details of this are incorrect as I think about it now — we'd been having a lively discussion along some tangent probably unrelated to the material for the day. Without us noticing it, you quietly set up and started playing a video about string theory, and Roger joked something about how you can't turn your back on Ault's classes because you never know what might be coming next. I always embraced that energy and many of other students likewise seem to have flourished in that environment. I think my teaching style today is similar, especially in my upper-level classes, but there's a constant tension between the students that embrace that kind of exploratory freedom and those that need a structured sequence to follow. **Is that teaching style something that you developed intentionally, or did it just happen? Did it**

**evolve over time? Did you encounter students who resisted that freedom, and if so how did you respond to their concerns?**

This may be kind of a vague or overly broad question, but I'm thinking about how to connect to Romanticism. One of the major revelations I recall about Blake in your classes was his investment in processes and the way in which a work as such was never a stable, fixed surface to be read but rather one fraction out of many possibilities, made real only in the moment of looking at a particular page or marginal doodle (and finding in that one fragment resonances of every other incommensurable alternative). This is similar to how I perceive the web now, where the complexity of the network, the economic imperatives that compel its architecture, and the preponderances of the "stream" as a model for content (think Facebook or Twitter) make it literally, technically true that every individual's page view is a unique textual event. In some cases, individuality can be leveraged against us for rhetorical or commercial reasons, like when publishers will present the same article to different users with different headlines based on how their algorithms will predict those users will respond to that content. In other cases, that individuality can be critical, like when I use the browser extension Hypothes.is to amend, extend, or critique an article that I find useful — a personal (re)version I guess. In a sense, permanent or static content seems more radical than Blake's (as it seems to me) always-in-motion sense of textuality. **So where does Blake's vision fit into this contemporary milieu? What would he think of something like Wikipedia?**

Finally, working on ImageText was one of the most challenging, significant, and formative experiences of my experiences in graduate school. So much of my identity as a teacher — from the web design I teach in my intro class to the critical articles I assign in my graphic novel class — can be traced back to the work I did on ImageText. I don't know that I have a question here; I mainly want to thank you for trusting me with that responsibility and giving me that opportunity. **Short of launching a new journal and building a platform from scratch, are there other ways I can give my students significant opportunities like that?**

As I look back at these now, I realize there may be some overlap among these questions and probably also with Laurie's, so I'm sure you're welcome to move through these however you see fit (or not at all). It's been really fun thinking back to all those seminars, and I look forward to talking with you soon.

Best,

Zach

Hi Don,

As you can probably tell from the other letters shared here, you've inspired a whole generation of scholars from all corners of academia. I decided to write my own letter to you, but I also didn't want it to be too overwhelming. Enough? Or too much? I decided to limit myself to two questions, but also include some anecdotes.

I recently wrote an introduction with Andrew Burkett of Union College to a series of articles on "William Blake and Pedagogy" for *Romantic Circles*. In that introduction, I recounted a story told by Catherine Blake and relayed through Frederic Tatham about William Blake as a teacher. And it reminded me of you. In the story, Blake was contracted to teach drawing to "some families of high rank." Such employment was not very profitable

for after his lesson he got into conversation with his pupils & was found so entertaining & pleasant, possessing such novel thoughts & such eccentric notions, together with such jocose hilarity & amiable demeanor, that he frequently found himself asked to stay [to] dinner ... Thus he stopped whole days from his work at home" (Bentley, *Blake Records*, 184).

As Catherine's story goes, Blake was subsequently "recommended & nearly obtained an Appointment to teach Drawing to the Royal Family," but, of course, this shocked rather than delighted Blake, who quickly became worried that "he would have been expected to have lived in comparative respectability, not to say splendour, a mode of life, as he thought, derogatory to the simplicity of his designs & deportment" (184-5). As such, Blake is said to have rejected the offer, ended his appointments with his other rich students, and decided to get on by other sources of income.

The story reminds me of you not only due to Blake's obsessive focus on his own "novel thoughts" and "eccentric notions," but also fact that he was fundamentally concerned with inspiring his students and teaching them a way of life rather than a literary history or a bunch of content. **Reflecting on your own decades as a teacher of literature, comics, and media, how would you characterize your approach to teaching?**

Back in 2014, Philip Pullman wrote an article on [what Blake meant to him](#) for The Guardian. I decided to write my own post in response about what [you and Blake meant to me](#). I'll recount a bit of what I wrote there. Pullman says in the introduction of his article that sometimes we find an artist "who functions like a key that unlocks a part of ourselves we never knew was there. [...] Something awakes that was asleep, doors open that were closed, lights come on in all the windows of a palace inside us, the existence of which we never expected." You had that impact on me almost instantly. I remember, particularly, the moment Michael Sansone introduced you to me at a graduate student party in the Fall of 2003.

**Michael:** What are you working on Don?

**Don:** Well, I'm exploring how equations can be used to chart the construction of space and time in The Book of Urizen. See, you can create a chart of the nights of creation that shows how Urizen constructs the Newtonian universe while also — simultaneously — constructing himself. I mean, it's a non-Euclidean space at the beginning, of course, but nonetheless it's impossibility can be sketched pretty easily.

**Me** (in my mind): uh...

(Don shuffles off as I try to figure out what exactly had just happened).

I think these moments of strangeness were so central to my education. In class, I always wanted to hold on to those strange synchronicities that followed you throughout almost every discussion. **Can you recount any experiences with Blake that you had as a student which particularly impacted how you thought about him or taught him? These could either be in the act of reading Blake's work or in courses you took where Blake was covered.**

Perhaps more than any other teacher I had at the University of Florida, you shaped the thinker and the teacher I've become. Your compassion for students, your attentiveness to the oddities of our existence, your lack of interest for the hierarchies and the presumptions of academia — I've learned so much from you. I remember that Blake quote we spent so many hours reading and rereading: "For the Eye altering alters all." If nothing else, I hope you realize just how many eyes you've altered.

Take care,  
Roger Whitson