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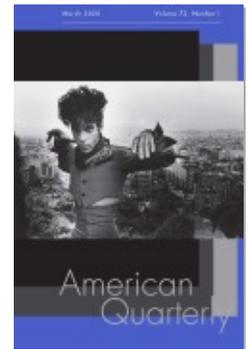
Richard Pryor's Peoria: Footnotes and Fandom

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Melissa Dollman

Scott Saul et al., *Richard Pryor's Peoria: A Digital Companion to the Biography *Becoming Richard Pryor, www.becomingrichardpryor.com/pryors-peoria/ (accessed January 4, 2020).**

Traditionally, biographers have done their research—rooted around in archives, conducted their interviews, sleuthed for missing puzzle pieces—and then streamlined that research to write the story of the person in question. For the sake of their readers, they often bury some of the messiness of what their research has dug up.

—Scott Saul, www.becomingrichardpryor.com/pryors-peoria/home/about/

It's so much easier for me to talk about my life in front of two thousand people than it is one-to-one. I'm a real defensive person, because if you were sensitive in my neighborhood you were something to eat.

—Richard Pryor, quoted in Scott Saul, *Becoming Richard Pryor*

We may not be literate, but we visual than a motherfucker.

—Richard Pryor, quoted in Joe Layton, *Richard Pryor: Live on the Sunset Strip*

The late Richard Pryor's (1940–2005) career spanned from the 1960s to his ascent into superstardom in the late 1970s and 1980s. He was (and still is) one of the most universally beloved stand-up comedians, a producer, a writer, and an actor. He recorded several highly influential comedy albums. The filmed versions of his stand-up performances, *Richard Pryor: Live in Concert* (1979), *Richard Pryor: Live on Sunset Strip* (1982), *Richard Pryor . . . Here and Now* (1983), as well as feature films in which he acted or starred, including *Wattstax* (1973), *Car Wash* (1976), *Silver Streak* (1976), *The Wiz* (1978), *Superman III* (1983), and *Lost Highway* (1997), speak to how far his star had risen, and how widely known he became, in the two decades after he left Peoria. After a period of failing health during the 1990s and early 2000s, he died an untimely death at sixty-five in 2005. Scott Saul, in his biography, *Becoming Richard Pryor*, dedicates about the first quarter of the book to telling the story of the multitalented Pryor's earliest years as a youth in Peoria, Illinois, through

age twenty-two, and how those experiences with place, family, and populace continued to sculpt his comedic storytelling throughout his lifetime. If you are already a fan of the man and his work, Richard Pryor's Peoria: A Digital Companion to the Biography *Becoming Richard Pryor*, is an annotated journey through those formative years. More than that, it provides an enlightening history of *the* former "sin city" of the Midwest that produced both Pryor and Betty Friedan. More still, the site presents intimate snapshots of Black Peorians of the 1940s through the 1970s—entrepreneurs, teachers, students, parents, artists, and ne'er-do-wells—and maps of the neighborhoods in which they lived.

Upon its release in 2014, Saul's book received a multitude of positive reviews. From *Newsweek*, *Time*, and the *New York Times* to other authors like Michael Chabon and online publications such as *Vulture* and the *Daily Beast*, many reviewers applauded Saul's exhaustive archival research along with his prose. As Joan Acocella wrote for the *New Yorker*, "Whatever Pryor is involved with—brothels in postwar Peoria, high-school dropout rates for Black teenagers in that time and place, and African-American G.I.'s chance of getting a date in Germany in the late fifties, the coffee-house scene in Berkeley in the sixties, the Black Power movement in Oakland in the seventies (and that's just the beginning—forget all the later and much more complicated business of working in nightclubs and TV and movies)—Saul has studied it all."¹ And the book's companion website, Richard Pryor's Peoria, is a curated online archive of what Saul studied. Envisioned as a multimodal project, it is a trove of digitized photographs, newspaper articles, and official/governmental records, all displayed and organized correspondingly with highlights from Pryor's personal life: the places he lived, worked, and frequented, a history of "his" Peoria, and other key elements that corroborate Saul's biography of the comedian through 1962, when he left Illinois. It is an "attempt," the author states in the "About the Site" section, "to open up the work of a biography for the digital age" and "create a more open-ended experience." Furthermore, it complicates the false sense of linearity produced by reading and, presumably, writing about a person's life as a straight trajectory through space and time.

Releasing books in conjunction with accompanying digital companions—websites containing additional, evidential materials—is not a new concept. However, examples are not so numerous as to mitigate the need to mention other web-based extensions of print-based texts. James S. Liebman's *The Wrong Carlos: Anatomy of a Wrongful Execution* and website of the same name, for instance, offers a number of evidential resources related to the criminal case. N. Katherine Hayles's "How We Think: A Digital Companion" includes digital assets, interviews, and other data accordingly left out of a printed text.

In the category of film and media studies, there are at least two examples of websites that offer readers access to the actual, digitized, archival films about which authors write in the books: *Learning with the Lights Off* (videos hosted by Oxford University Press), and *Amateur Movie Making: Aesthetics of the Everyday in New England Film, 1915–1960* (videos hosted by Northeast Historic Film archive). The filmmakers Gary Ross and Penny Lane created companion websites with primary documentation for their films *Free State of Jones* and *Nuts!*, respectively. While widely different projects in terms of scope, topic, and anticipated audience, the aforementioned share something in common: their desire to facilitate public access to at least some of the same evidence on which the authors based their arguments. Similarly, Richard Pryor's Peoria is a collection of annotated footnotes, images, and shorter essays that serve both as illustration and as continuation of the author's argument.

Saul and team built Richard Pryor's Peoria on a WordPress (WP) platform.² With other open-source content management system (CMS) and web publishing choices such as Omeka (Corporation for Digital Scholarship / George Mason University) or Scalar (Alliance for Networking Visual Culture / University of Southern California) to choose from for anyone's hypertext, data visualization, and multimedia display needs, it is difficult to pin down specifically why they chose WP.³ However, it is a widely used CMS and online publishing platform that offers a great variety of plug-ins, templates, and customizable Cascading Style Sheet (CSS) styling for the more advanced user who wants to maintain a certain degree of control over implementation of the aforementioned bells and whistles.⁴ And there is a sizable amount of material to organize, maintain, and exhibit about Pryor and Peoria. The scope (1920s–2000s) encompasses police records, court records, military records, education records, municipal records, government reports, newspapers (local, national, international, oriented to the Black community), magazines, records of civil rights and urban reform organizations, published memoirs, visual art, photographs (WPA, city documents, Pryor family photos). Thumbnails of scanned images and documents are grouped thematically and scroll by laterally with the click of an arrow. The majority of illustrative evidence is downloadable and includes citations, annotations, and hyperlinked category labels and tags. All is organized and curated along overarching themes: People, Places, Eras, and Themes, and subthemes within each. Contextualizing essays of various lengths, as well as annotations, begin at the head of each theme and thread throughout each segment of the drop-down menus. "More" contains several "abouts," including an essay on Pryor's life after leaving Peoria, a page about the book, the author, the site, and the tag cloud, with the typical changes in font size based on frequency of

occurrence as tags assigned to archival materials. This section is where one finds the only search bar for natural language searching of the entire website. Eras are laid out via a refinable timeline. Relationships connect in an interactive chart. And there are also static maps and data visualizations.

Saul envisioned Richard Pryor's Peoria as a digital humanities project while writing the biography, and it began two years into the five-year research process.⁵ The site, as a virtual tour of Peoria and Pryor's life there, emerged in 2010 in a nascent form while Saul was a fellow at the Stanford Humanities Center at Stanford University. After receiving a grant in 2012 from the university's Spatial History Project (now part of the Center for Spatial and Textual Analysis), he hired three fellows, one undergrad from Stanford and one undergrad and PhD student from the University of California, Berkeley, where he is a professor of English. The D-Lab at Berkeley now also shares credit as a co-collaborator with the Spatial History Project. Following the turn in best practices whereby recognition of the *multiple* actors responsible for digital ventures is increasingly de rigueur, Saul shares attribution for the labor that ultimately increases digital access to his evidence gathering, and in a sense advertises his book. The site credits list him as supervisor of the online archive's creation. To date, several people are also named as contributors to the site's creation, most notably, the site designer William Bottini (fellow); the developers Christopher Church, Scott Paul McGinnis, and Alex Tarr (fellow); the writers Camille Brown (fellow), Maya Kronfeld, Ismail Muhammad, and Tarr; the cartographer Erik Steiner; and the designer Ethan Goldstein. Saul is listed, first, as editor and publisher. What is unclear from the list of acknowledgments on the "About the Site" page is, for example, how much of the text is written by Saul or Brown, Kronfeld, Muhammad, and Tarr. There are no names attributed to individual essays.

It is not entirely transparent who was responsible for the more hidden aspects of site development.⁶ Who scanned the documents, cropped the photos, formatted texts, optimized file sizes, and organized the back-end file structure? To be fair, these are the sorts of foundational activities that often go unmentioned. Numerous unseen hands, even before Saul and crew began, made sense of the "messiness" of newspaper articles and repositories' photographs utilized throughout. This archive is an interactive footnote section, of sorts, containing artifacts he perused during the research phase for the book. Footnotes connote labor. However, labor that precedes the research phase is often overlooked—the originator of a record or photograph, the caretaker(s) of the object, the, if needed, conservator of the object, potentially an annotator or descriptive cataloger who accelerates access through words or tags, the person who scanned the object for dissemination, the reference librarian who

may help search, the researcher who “discovers” and repurposes the object, and so on. Similar to how the photos Pryor’s family supplied might have been organized into photo albums or scrapbooks, the records that came from archival institutions or newspaper repositories did not spring fully formed in an organized manner.⁷

So who is the ideal or presumed audience for Richard Pryor’s Peoria? Initially, it seems as if it is geared to the book’s readership. The website went live just a couple of weeks before the book release. Saul addresses the audience as “Readers.” To those people “interested in a more multi-dimensional—and more intimate—account of Pryor’s years in Peoria,” he suggests on the “About the Site” page that they buy and read his book, “which traces Pryor’s journey from Peoria all the way to Hollywood stardom.” I question, to a certain extent, what the takeaway would be for those visitors not already interested in Richard Pryor. The lack of an opening splash screen intentionally forces the visitor to jump in and start looking around. There is a useful and enjoyable four-plus-minute introductory video, narrated by Saul, on the front page, which contextualizes and connects Peoria’s history as the “sin city” of the comedian’s childhood in the 1940s and 1950s to the livelihoods of his family and friends, as well as the background for much of his darker humor. Still, this engaging opening might leave a viewer unfamiliar with Pryor’s humor wanting more. For instance, if Saul had perhaps included more footage on the site from Pryor’s performances where he discusses Peoria or Peorians (although there are likely rights issues to contend with regarding repurposing video and audio clips). Such an inclusion might intrigue a newcomer enough to search for his stand-up routines and films—and buy Saul’s book! Established fans of Pryor will likely delight in viewing photos of Richard in his younger years, and those of his father, stepmother, and grandmother, who feature so prominently as characters in his comedy.

For those who do not opt for the long-form printed book, there are two accessible essays that summarize the pre-show business phase of Pryor’s life, the years in the limelight, and the lower-profile years. For someone stumbling across the site unaware of Pryor’s intersecting histories as a comedian/actor, a midwesterner, and a Black man in the United States (and many other attributes), the texts work as a fine introduction particularly to the collection of supporting materials gathered and organized. Meaningfully, the other essays, particularly under “Eras” and “Places,” present a microcosmic view into how racial segregation and desegregation, vice, corruption, urban renewal and reform affected, sometimes block by block, a midsized Illinois city and its citizenry.

More than one type of fandom is on display on this website. First is the same “fervor and intensity with which digital humanist nerds and geeks ap-

preciate their objects of study.”⁸ As a Richard Pryor fan myself, I delighted in navigating through this curated exhibit about both the man and the built and social environment that formed him, and from which he moved on physically. This project is an effective demonstration of where biography meets cultural geography in an engaging digital humanities project. Saul shares his excitement for Pryor, research, and maybe for footnotes. In fact, he writes on the “About the Site” page: “Historians experience a ‘eureka’ moment when, in poring through an archive, they discover a revelatory document. . . . These documents—many of them ephemeral and fragmentary, and all of them generated out of a particular moment, place, and confluence of interests—were pulsing with life and meaning. I wanted others to feel that life, and find their own meanings.” Richard Pryor’s Peoria totally draws out an infectious need to click, read, and, for superfans, put faces to names. That level of agency afforded to patrons, however, does not necessarily mean that the site replicates the “discovery” process, as desired. The curator’s choices, annotations, categorization, site organization—really all the decisions made—mediate their experience. The hand of the author is ever presenting his object of study. Right in the URL is the clearest evidence; the site is first and foremost a companion to his book.

Notes

- I would like to thank author and editor-publisher of Richard Pryor’s Peoria: A Digital Companion to the Biography *Becoming Richard Pryor*, Scott Saul, for cheerfully corresponding with me, answering my questions, and providing additional details not discoverable on the site.
1. Joan Acocella, “Richard Pryor, Flame-thrower,” *New Yorker*, March 4, 2015, www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/richard-ryor-still-burning.
 2. Scott Saul, email message to author, December 26, 2018. When I asked Saul if the Wordpress platform presented any limitations, he responded simply that there were surprisingly few. In fact, his team re-purposed platform schemata for another project titled The Berkeley Revolution (revolution.berkeley.edu/).
 3. For more on Omeka, see omeka.org/, and on Scalar, scalar.me/anvc/scalar/.
 4. “WordPress.com and WordPress.org,” Wordpress.com, accessed January 4, 2020, en.support.wordpress.com/com-vs-org/. The degree to which one has control over all aspects of implementation is often dependent on whether your site is hosted by a university, which sometimes limits what plug-ins you may use, or you choose a WordPress.com personal account, a WordPress Business plan, or WordPress.org (they host versus you pay an independent company like Reclaim Hosting [reclaimhosting.com/] to host).
 5. Saul, email message to author.
 6. Saul, email message to author. Saul was very open in his correspondence with me about attributing specific credit for parts of the site’s creation. In the site’s credit section online, however, who wrote what texts is not as clear.

7. Eira Tansey, "Archives without Archivists," *Reconstruction* 16.1 (2016), web.archive.org/web/20161031084443/http://reconstruction.eserver.org/Issues/161/Tansey.shtml#_edn36 (archived at the Internet Archive). For more on archives and labor, see Michelle Caswell, "The Future of the Painful Past: Archival Labor and Materiality in the South Asian American Digital Archive," in *Excavating Memory: Sites of Remembering and Forgetting* (Boca Raton, FL: Chapman & Hall/CRC, 2004), 376–94; and Kenneth Goldsmith, "The Artful Accidents of Google Books," *New Yorker*, December 4, 2013, www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-artful-accidents-of-google-books.
8. Alexis Lothian, "From Transformative Works to #transformDH: Digital Humanities as (Critical) Fandom," *American Quarterly* 70.3 (2018): 371.