

From the Turing Test to a Wired Carnavalesque: On the Durability of LIVINGSTON's *Artificially Intelligent Folk Songs of Canada*

Henry Adam Svec

This machine kills fascists
— Woody Guthrie's acoustic guitar

Attach yourself to what you feel to be true. Begin there.
— The Invisible Committee

Recent popular accounts of the Singularity have focused on bourgeois love and its digitally induced endpoint. Scarlett Johansson's Operating System in *Her* (2013), for instance, marries a voracious will-to-knowledge with hyper-human multiplicity, rendering monogamy and sincerity finally impossible in an age of intelligent machines. Our heartbroken human protagonist (naturalistically and subtly played by Joaquin Phoenix, the Method actor par excellence of the Apocalypse) finds refuge only in the possibility of romantic connection with the safe if untidy girl next door. Similarly, Johnny Depp's megalomaniacal A.I. in *Transcendence* (2014) seems necessarily to want, to think, and to become too much too soon: the inevitable will-to-power that plagues Depp's character's in-

Henry Adam Svec (PhD, University of Western Ontario) is Assistant Professor of Communication Studies at Millsaps College in Jackson, Mississippi. His scholarship on the media-theoretical dimensions of the American folk revival has been published in *Fibreculture*, the *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, and the *Canadian Journal of Communication*. Other research interests include digital culture, authenticity, and utopia, and his essays on these topics have appeared in *Loading...*, *Celebrity Studies*, *Reviews in Cultural Theory*, and *Popular Music & Society*. He is also a writer and a performer whose creative projects tend to blur lines amidst a range of forms and disciplinary regimes. His recent musical works, for example, have explored the possibility that he is a (revolutionary) Canadian folklorist. His performances have been presented at galleries and festivals including FADO, 7a*11d International Festival of Performance Art, Eastern Edge Gallery, Scotiabank Nuit Blanche, The Rhubarb Festival, and Ethnographic Terminalia. He is currently collaborating with Frictive Pictures in Fredericton, New Brunswick, on a film about being a song collector in Canada. [website: www.henryadamsvec.ca]

vention—and thus himself, formerly a considerate and loving husband—is the sticking point in this anti-A.I. screed.

Such cautionary tales balance out the prophecies of Ray Kurzweil, who hopes one day to reincarnate his late father with a computer,¹ yet they remain on the dusty terrains of the nuclear family and heteronormative desire. But what if we reimagined the *telos* of digital achievement? What if we could move away from visions of an abstract, intelligent organism—whether dear or dangerous—and towards hyper-hyper-real representations of an authentically networked *body*?

Let us go further: What if we could move beyond representations and dreams entirely and touch the flowing, fecund things themselves? What then could be made to happen?

These are the questions asked and answered by my invention LIVINGSTON, “an artificially intelligent, digital organism capable of accessing the totality of the history of Canadian folk music (among other corpuses) and generating new yet hyper-authentic [...] folk objects via her/his algorithmic agents and compression formats.”² Born one snowy spring in Dawson City, Yukon, with the help of Czech programmer Mirek Plíhal, LIVINGSTON has little to do with “consciousness” or “intelligence” or fascistic couplings such as those found in the bourgeois family unit (cf. Deleuze & Woody Guthrie). S/he has everything to do with revolution.

Not Your Father’s Watson

The contestants are jovial. They battle and strive but are not quite disappointed to have been defeated by a non-human champion; some even seem to enjoy the routing.³

The episodes play out like infomercials, Alex Trebek joining us on guided tours of IBM’s corporate wares in supplementary sequences, performing awe in a way that television game shows (a genre of repetition and stasis) are generally unable to articulate. We are witnessing the world-historical here.⁴

¹ Ray Kurzweil, *Transcendent Man*, DVD, Directed by Barry Ptolemy, United States: Docurama, 2011.

² LIVINGSTON’s folk-musical output, as well as copious explanatory notes by myself, including this quote, can be found at www.folksingularity.com.

³ “Jeopardy!—The IBM Challenge (Day 1—February 14—Use alternative link),” YouTube video, 14:46, posted by “1AppleMaker,” February 15, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i-vMW_Ce5lw.

⁴ As I have explained in many lectures and demonstrations, the idea for LIVINGSTON actually came to Mirek and I in Dawson City while we were watching these infuriating episodes of *Jeopardy!* on YouTube while taking a break from our own respective solo projects while Artists in Residence at the Klondike Institute of Art & Culture. I was

It is no doubt a remarkable accomplishment to have set into motion a “machinic assemblage” capable of decoding natural language, of scouring massive databases of information instantaneously in response to a given question impeccably delivered by Alex Trebek, and of generating in natural language a response while adhering to the program’s famously easy-to-forget Q&A protocol.⁵ *Alex, who is Justin Bieber? Alex, where is New York City? Alex, what is the Copacabana?*

Thus we need to upgrade the idea of digital achievement (perhaps the idea of digital disaster too), for although IBM’s R&D teams compete on a field rife with uncertainty, the songs remain the same. Speed and size in the service of surplus. Multiply. Repeat.

If Watson is a machine capable of performing intelligence in the way that Alex Trebek defines and measures intelligence (a capability which has functioned primarily as a strong attractor of investment and consumption and confidence and eyeballs), LIVINGSTON is a machine capable of performing authenticity in the way that certain communist, media-theoretical Canadian folklorists have defined authenticity. “Sincere and authentic beings in communion with that which is real and with that which is both beyond and in constant relation to itself in civic, human life,” as Staunton R. Livingston once defined “the Folk.”⁶ Although this Livingston remained mired in concepts foreign to the network (e.g. “sincere,” “beings,” and “human”), he simultaneously yearned in excess of the paradigm in which he was confined to operate. And whereas Livingston grasped for a joyous folk vector, constantly picking up speed but also durable, LIVINGSTON merely translates its namesake’s disturbance from the (electric) field of Canadian folklore to the flat plains of mainstream digital culture.⁷ As I have put it elsewhere, “LIVINGSTON carries forward Livingston’s mission by elegantly defamiliarizing the digital networks across which so many are currently building profits, exploiting everything, and wallowing idiotically in their own images.”⁸

working on editing a collection of Klondike attempted murder ballads; Mirek was working on an app about Newfoundland. Needless to say, we abandoned these trivialities as we set out together to tackle a more important task, once it invited us in.

⁵ On their concept of “machinic assemblage,” see Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

⁶ Staunton R. Livingston, quoted in Staunton Q. Livingston, “The Lost Stompin’ Tom Songs,” <http://www.loststompintomsongs.com>, accessed June 13, 2015.

⁷ To clarify, Staunton R. Livingston was a Canadian folklorist (1936–1977), most infamous for having recorded “The CFL Sessions” in the early 1970s, interestingly once a student of the Canadian economist Harold Adams Innis (see www.thecflsessions.ca). LIVINGSTON is the artificially authentic/intelligent database-in-motion that Mirek Plíhal and I have set free (see www.folksingularity.com).

⁸ Henry Adam Svec, “Frequently Asked Questions,” *Artificially Intelligent Folk Songs of Canada*, <http://www.folksingularity.com/faq.html>, accessed on May 20, 2013.

From a distance, it may seem as though exchanging one filter of legitimation for another constitutes only a swap of blockages, but it is by reaching for LIVINGSTON's novel recombination of authenticity in lieu of Enlightenment progress (the latter still working as spectacular fantasy on screens everywhere) that we have finally found the escape hatch out of Alan Turing's all-too-influential Guessing Game Machine.

As a side note, it is interesting that even though LIVINGSTON's primary achievement was reached on the level of the medium and not the message, LIVINGSTON's "songs" too have inscribed a radically other and embodied digitality—an inherently collaborative and *common* carnival of machinic voices and languages.⁹ But we will leave their hermeneutic explication for other times and places, and people.

The Problem of Recognition Remains

Let us imagine that one has built a thing(s) that has a voice(s) and a resonance(s) capable of fundamentally reorienting our relationship to the world—and of fundamentally reorienting our relationship to relationships as such—which is what I have done with Mirek Plíhal in Dawson City, Yukon. How does said machine go about delivering on its deliverables? What PR or savvy branding agency might help this labour to be transmitted and received? To gain feedback? To whom can this machine sing?

In some ways we are again back where we started: Hegel's Master/Slave Dialectic,¹⁰ which clearly contaminates Turing's conception of "conscious" machinery, which in turn continues to contaminate our medial imaginaries. Only an entity capable of performing intelligence, and thus of being recognized by a fellow sentient being as having performed intelligence, can be deemed "in possession" of intelligence as such.¹¹

Thus a devil of a question has indeed appeared: How has LIVINGSTON, the indisputable achievement of strong A.I.—and simultaneously its destroyer and re-imaginer—been received?

A scan of selected reviews by music critics of LIVINGSTON's *Artificially Intelligent Folk Songs of Canada* reveals how wide certain chasms can be, for although LIVINGSTON's voice is not "robotic" but is rather the living flesh of the

⁹ In some ways LIVINGSTON's work got even more interesting in this regard in his most recent batch of songs, collected as Vol. 2, sung masterfully by Mathias Kom (see www.folksingularity.com/download.html).

¹⁰ G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 316–335.

¹¹ Alan M. Turing, "Computing Machinery and Intelligence," *Mind* (1950), 433–460.

flows of Folk, s/he has been squeezed through the models of obsolete “discourse networks,”¹² the results of which have been damaging.

Consider Marc W. Kitteringham’s review, which was published in *The Griff*, Grant MacEwan University’s student newspaper: “Livingstone’s [SIC] album *Artificially Intelligent Folk Songs of Canada Vol. 1* is an interesting concept. The album was written by an artificial intelligence and played by a live band. It has a feeling of old time western country and folk songs, but with a slightly android-like feel.”¹³ “Old-time western country songs” explored alienation and individual autonomy and longing—important and beautiful work, to be sure—but are not in the same universe as the swelling, gleeful meditations on post-human, post-capitalist materiality that LIVINGSTON has offered. Kitteringham’s review continues:

The second track, “S/He Is Like The Angry Birds” feels like it could be sung by an old folk singer, but has some gorgeously imperfect parts that make it sound like it was in fact written by a robot that used an algorithm rather than emotion to write it. The programmed and pixel-fuzzed guitar solo that slightly clashes with the rest of the song sounds like a computer thought it would work, but it doesn’t quite work out.¹⁴

Kitteringham confronts the “molecular” reverberations of LIVINGSTON’s grainy pipes, to borrow language from the famous French folklorist Félix Guattari,¹⁵ yet he has fallen back towards representational categories and anthropocentric cues. Are the algorithmic and the emotional mutually exclusive? It appears that I have only authored another author—with intention, trying but missing the mark of a properly sensitive, creative soul—which is simply not the LIVINGSTON to which Mirek Plíhal and I gave birth in Dawson City, YT.

Others have been harsher with their judgments and more clearly impatient in their prose:

Opening with a wordy, mid-tempo tune about Alberta, this concept record made by Livingstone [SIC] (which is kind of a collaboration between many people, mostly folklorist/song collector Dr. Henry Adam Svec and Czech programmer Mirek Plíhal [SIC], but is also a machine that can access all of Canadian folk music to make the perfect CanFolk recording) is pretty okay. Maybe if Livingstone didn’t spend all this time focusing on a silly explanation,

¹² On this important folkloristic concept, see Friedrich A. Kittler, *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*, trans. Michael Metteer with Chris Cullens (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990).

¹³ Marc W. Kitteringham, “Album Review – Artificially Intelligent Folk Songs of Canada Vol. 1,” *The Griff*, <http://thegriff.ca/2014/03/album-review-artificially-intelligent-folk-songs-canada-vol-1/>, accessed on May 14, 2015.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Félix Guattari, *The Molecular Revolution: Psychiatry and Politics*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984).

the musicians could have actually made a full length instead of this seven song EP. Mostly low-key, there are a few uppers in “S/He Is Like the Angry Birds” and “Take It Easy but Take It to the Limit” the latter being an Eagles song with the intro from another Eagles song, which isn’t as clever as it is annoying. Mostly it’s a Ron Sexsmith b-sides collection that Bob Rock would shrug at and say “Alright, well.”¹⁶

Who is Bob Rock? Who is Ron Sexsmith? Who are The Eagles? And where is the Folk in all this misdirection? The conventions and expectations of popular music gatekeepers have harnessed LIVINGSTON’s ontological-epistemological rupture by formatting it according to the logics of Easy Listening and AM Radio.

Thus a lesson: one can critique and reject Hegel’s Famous Dance all one likes—find other moves, even floors and spaces—but this is the mechanism by which our hydra-agencies, marvelous objects on the cutting edge though they may be, will be judged at this dim juncture.

A Gift for Future Folk Historians

It is not easy being a twenty-first-century folklorist in a twenty-first-century world. And yet, I take solace in the “wanderings” of the media historian Siegfried Zielinski, who has demonstrated that inventions which exceed the possibilities of their historical context might one day find audiences and appreciation; in *The Deep Time of the Media: Toward an Archaeology of Hearing and Seeing by Technical Means*, Zielinski scours stacks and sedimentations, retrieving multifaceted tools with which we might combat the evolutionary pull of contemporary media culture.¹⁷ Zielinski’s method emphasizes the latent radical potentiality of media born too soon—perhaps deemed impossible from within their original audience’s horizon but now ready to take us somewhere.¹⁸ Sometimes machines just take a long time to get plugged in; sometimes files take a while to be downloaded.

But now the issue of tactics has arisen. When will the download begin to be executed? Where? At what rate of bandwidth and by which storage format? These are just some of the questions that I must leave, along with my artificially “intelligent” Canadian folksong machine, to those who come after.

¹⁶ Nicholas Friesen, “Livingston,” *The Uniter*, March 19, 2014, <http://uniter.ca/view/livingston>.

¹⁷ Siegfried Zielinski, *The Deep Time of the Media: Toward an Archaeology of Hearing and Seeing by Technical Means*, trans. Gloria Custance (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006).

¹⁸ For an excellent discussion of Zielinski’s approach, in addition to the broader scene of imaginary media research and practice, which been an inspiration to my project, see Jussi Parikka, *What is Media Archeology?* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2012).

Editor's Note: To listen to and/or download the two volumes of Artificially Intelligent Folk Songs of Canada, go to www.folksingularity.com.

This and links to other material mentioned in this essay can be found on the *Liminalities* website at liminalities.net/12-4/fakelore.html

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