The Dark Side of Digital Humanities:
Dispatches from Two Recent MLA Conventions

DISCLAIMER: I am not now, nor have I ever been, a digital humanist. Yes, it is true that I have friends who are digital humanists. And I have been known to travel occasionally in digital humanities circles. As former department chair at Georgia Tech and Wayne State University, I have helped to support and fund work that could be described in terms of digital humanities. And as the director of C21, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee’s Center for 21st Century Studies, I have programmed talks and workshops designed to encourage faculty and graduate students to incorporate new digital modes of research and communication into their scholarship. But I have never done digital humanities work myself.

This essay grows out of my presentation at the 2013 Modern Language Association (MLA) roundtable I organized called the “Dark Side of the Digital Humanities,” which forms the core of this special issue of differences. The proposal I submitted for the MLA13 roundtable opened with the following questions: “Is it only an accident that the emergence of digital humanities has coincided with the intensification of the economic crisis in the humanities in higher education? Or is there a connection between these two developments?” I began with these questions because of my sense that the digital humanities (or “DH” in Twitter-pated short-speak) finds itself at a crossroads, particularly in its relation to what is variously called the
“traditional humanities,” the “interpretive humanities,” or just the plain old “humanities.” As evidenced in recent discussions of the future of the humanities in print and online media, and especially as first crystallized at the 2011 Modern Language Association convention in Los Angeles, there is a stark contrast, and I believe a growing divide, between the outlooks and prospects of DH faculty and graduate students and those of faculty and graduate students in the mainstream humanities. This divide, I would argue, while in danger of being exacerbated as university administrators continue to see moocs or something similar as the solution to their funding problems, is not merely a superficial or epiphenomenal manifestation of cutbacks in public funding for higher education but one whose roots can be traced to two different visions of the value and purpose of a humanities education (American Academy; see Google).

This divide brings with it a structure of academic feeling that I have repeatedly encountered over the past several years. This feeling first began bothering me at MLA11 in Los Angeles, where the incommensurate affective moods between panels on “digital” humanities and those on what might be understood as “crisis” humanities were palpable. MLA11 generated an acute sense of two different trajectories, two different moods, two different futures—even in a climate of severe financial cutbacks.1 This disparity was especially evident in the collective affectivity and moods of different groups of sessions. Panels on hard times for the humanities and the worsening crisis in higher education featured papers filled with pessimism, anger, and sometimes sobering solutions to the diminished and diminishing funding streams devoted to the humanities. Panels on the future of digital humanities or the role of social media in fostering public intellectuals, on the other hand, were filled with laughter, hope, and a growing sense of empowerment coming in part from the resources being furnished to DH by corporate, non-profit, and governmental foundations. This mood did not appear suddenly in 2011 but has been emerging, often unspoken or ignored, at least since the financial meltdown of 2008. Nor has it gone away, as demonstrated by the mooc bubble that began inflating in 2012, a bubble that generates digital utopian arguments about the remaking of higher education while intensifying the sense of precarity that has come to replace the security of tenure as the predominant affective mood of the academy.

MLA11 was the first convention held on the association’s new schedule, which moved the conference from its traditional December 27–30 dates to the first full weekend in January. Partly because there had been no MLA convention in 2010 (the 2009 convention was the last one on the old
difference

The new schedule marked some new programming innovations as well, so MLA11 was in some sense overdetermined as an inaugural, refounding, or originary moment in terms of the organization of the conference and its new temporality on the annual calendar. But MLA11 was not only about new beginnings; it was also marked by an elegiac tone that ran through memorial sessions for Eve Sedgwick and Barbara Johnson, both of whom had died in the past year. In addition to mourning the loss of these key figures, the memorial sessions functioned both to foreground ongoing continuities within the queer MLA community and to articulate the potential for new beginnings for feminist and queer theory. Although I’m going to focus here on the tension between digital humanities and the humanities of crisis, the memorials to Johnson and Sedgwick functioned in part to suggest how our reflections on the work and untimely loss of these two major scholars might open up some new discursive or mediated space not just for queer and feminist theory but also perhaps for the emergence of other forms of theory and practice as well. They may less optimistically be seen as further evidence for claims that the recent turn to the digital constitutes a turn away from issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality, an escape from the messiness of the traditional humanities to the safety of scripting, code, or interface design (Koh and Risam).

The sense of loss at MLA11 was also evident in panels devoted to the “crisis humanities,” which expressed the intense feelings of crisis and catastrophe produced by radical funding cuts in public support for education in Europe, Australia, and the United States. These cuts, and the concomitant reduction of the professoriate, have been under way for several decades now (particularly in the United States). But in the recessionary aftermath of the financial crisis of 2008, they reached a level unimaginable to most academics (although the “utopian” vision of a higher education whose future is dominated by MOOCs would prove even worse). Panels on the immediacy of the crisis in the humanities were accompanied by widespread historical critique of the devastating effects of the neoliberal university and its catastrophic legacy for the future. The urgency of this new “critical university studies” was especially palpable in California, where the University of California and California State University systems have only intensified their corporatism under continued funding cutbacks from the state. In addition to being marked by a new calendar and a revised programming model, MLA11 was notable for the one-day counter-MLA on the crisis in higher education staged during the convention at Loyola Law School, across the freeway from the Staples Convention Center.
Yet MLA 2011 was not all doom and gloom. The sessions I attended on the digital humanities were marked by an affectivity of vitality and growth, of optimism and new beginnings. A comparatively prosperous information technology funding climate created a set of issues and concerns for DH scholars very different from the economic crisis so palpable elsewhere. This climate had a variety of causes, including the growing investment of human and economic capital in digital humanities projects by university administrators and partly from the financial resources available to DH teachers, scholars, and developers from corporate, nonprofit, and governmental foundations. Digital humanities panels, too, addressed challenges produced by the changing climate in the humanities. Of most concern among DHers was the difficulty in getting departmental and university tenure committees to provide appropriate credit to digital work that does not end up as refereed articles or scholarly monographs and the lack of professional recognition for technical labor, which is too often performed by nontenure-track members of the academic precariate. For the purposes of this special issue, I would characterize the problem of reforming criteria for tenure and promotion a “first-world problem” and note instead the way in which the institutional structure of digital humanities threatens to intensify (both within DH itself and among the humanities more broadly) the proliferation of temporary, insecure labor that is rampant not only in the academy but throughout twenty-first-century capitalism.

Put starkly, academics on the left (which is pretty much everyone doing theory and cultural studies) blame the crisis in the humanities on the corporatization of the academy and the neoliberal insistence that the value of higher education must be measured chiefly if not solely in economic terms. University administrators and state legislatures have justified the shrinking of the tenured and tenure-track professoriate and the sharp growth of temporary and part-time labor in the academy in terms of bottom-line economics. Similarly, the explosion in student debt produced both by tuition hikes and decreasing family income in the United States has been intensified by the drastic cutbacks in state support for higher education, which has forced academic administrations to seek increased revenues elsewhere, including higher tuition and fees. Indeed, the most extreme versions of this critique see the shrinking of the tenured and tenure-track professoriate as a direct result of right-wing attacks on political correctness in the academy featured in the culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s.

Without discounting in the least the significance of these right-wing attacks, I would suggest that the problem is due more to neoliberal
economics than to neoconservative ideologies. Even while neoliberal market logic has led to the decimation of mainstream humanities, this same logic has encouraged foundations, corporations, and university administrations to devote new resources to the digital humanities. Indeed, it is largely due to the apparently instrumental or utilitarian value of the digital humanities (their ability to provide liberal arts majors with digital skills that can be turned into productive jobs) that university administrators, foundation officers, and government agencies have been so eager to fund DH projects, create DH undergraduate and graduate programs, and hire DH faculty. The recent fascination with moocs has accelerated the flow of resources and publicity toward new forms of digital pedagogy, as well as driven the agenda of digital humanities projects in the direction of massive online courses. This development threatens to increase the inequality both between the “haves” of digital humanities and the “have-nots” of mainstream humanities and between the elite private and public research universities that will provide moocs and the increasingly less well-funded and less well-attended small liberal arts colleges and public colleges and universities that will subscribe to these moocs to “save money.”

At MLA11, there was little attention paid in the DH panels to the larger economic crisis of the humanities. Instead, in the aftermath of MLA11, discussion initially focused on an emerging “star system” and “in-group/out-group” dynamics among the DH community. This discussion was prompted largely by William Pannapacker’s Chronicle of Higher Education blog post on MLA11 titled “Digital Humanities Triumphant?” After declaring digital humanities not just the next big thing, but “the thing,” indeed, the future of the humanities writ large, Pannapacker contended: “The digital humanities have some internal tensions, such as the occasional divide between builders and theorizers, and coders and noncoders. But the field, as a whole, seems to be developing an in-group, out-group dynamic that threatens to replicate the culture of Big Theory back in the 1980s and 1990s, which was alienating to so many people. It’s perceptible in the universe of Twitter: We read it, but we do not participate. It’s the cool-kids’ table.” Pannapacker’s account echoes some of my experiences at MLA11 digital humanities panels. In the panel I attended on the close reading of digital code, for example, the names of panelists were repeatedly switched and misidentified by speakers and moderator (both in the introductions and during the presentations) to the delight of those who knew the players without a scorecard and to the exclusion of those who didn’t. This kind of adolescent behavior, while amusing to those in the know, served precisely to draw a line between those who knew
the identities of the speakers on the panel and those who didn’t. While such a joke might be funny once, its continuation throughout the entire panel served not to welcome curious newcomers into the DH community, but to repel or exclude them.

In a thoughtful and balanced response to the question of an emerging star system in digital humanities, Matthew Kirschenbaum invokes David Shumway’s 1997 *PMLA* article “The Star System in Literary Studies” to make sense of the current status of digital humanities. Kirschenbaum takes up both similarities and differences between the current “star system” in digital humanities and the one that Shumway traces in literary studies from the emergence of “theory” in the 1970s and 1980s and of feminism and queer theory, cultural studies, and multiculturalism in the 1980s and 1990s. Kirschenbaum’s response suggests that the dynamics of the digital humanities community duplicates a pattern seen in other areas of the humanities when new modes of theory or interpretation, new critical paradigms, first become fashionable and then provoke resistance from those outside of these emerging paradigms along with charges of in-group/out-group dynamics and the celebrity-driven production of stars. But Kirschenbaum also distinguishes digital humanities from mainstream humanities in that celebrity and notoriety in DH cuts across traditional academic hierarchies and networks of prestige and is produced and intensified much more rapidly through networked media, especially by the extensive use by DHers of Twitter, which (unlike blogs and Facebook) is still not widespread among the humanities at large.

The post-MLA focus on celebrities and the star system was indicative, I would argue, of the feeling of promise and success that continues to bolster the DH community. Rather than the question of stars or celebrity, however, my chief interest is on the impact of digital humanities on research and teaching in the humanities in higher education—the relation of digital humanities to the future of the humanities in general. Looking back on the fields in which literary stardom manifested itself in the 1980s and 1990s, we can see that most of the new developments in critical theory and cultural studies were eventually incorporated into the overall structure of critical work in the humanities. Today, most departments need to teach, hire, and publish in these formerly new areas—and graduate students entering the profession have to be familiar with these theories and modes of reading as part of their graduate training. Whereas new modes of theory or interpretation have routinely been added to the taxonomy of expert knowledge in the humanities, it seems increasingly the case that something like digital
humanities will not just be added to what we do but will fundamentally reconfigure it. Indeed, such reconfiguration is already very much under way in the proliferation of distant reading and other data-driven forms of macro-analysis, graduate and undergraduate courses in digital research methods, the incorporation of video games and other digital media into the humanities curriculum, and the increasing number of assistant professor vacancies seeking faculty doing digital or new media work. Because digital humanities responds to or results from changes in the technologies of reading and writing, of information and communication, with which we all live and work, it is increasingly part and parcel of the lives and career practices of young scholars, no matter what their fields, no matter how print-based their work. Because of this new media paradigm change, one way to understand DH is (as Pannapacker and others have suggested) simply as humanities as now practiced and as will increasingly be practiced in the future.

Insofar as the digital humanities is also being marketed, branded, and funded as something different from (and more relevant to society, more fundable than) traditional humanities, it is worth considering how this difference is being understood. Thus, while the emergence of DH follows in many respects the pattern of change in the humanities, it also differs in that it comes at a critical moment for higher education in the United States and the West. Furthermore, its growth, support, and success can be traced, or is often explained, defended, or promoted, in terms of the very neoliberal values that have been seen to be the cause of the current crisis in, especially, public funding for higher education. Specifically, because digital humanities can teach students how to design, develop, and produce digital artifacts that are of value to society, they are seen to offer students marketable skills quite different from those gained by analyzing literature or developing critiques of culture. This divide between teachers and scholars interested in critique and those interested in production has been central to the selling of digital humanities. My concern is that this divide threatens both to increase tensions within the MLA community and to intensify the precarity running through the academic humanities writ large.

Unfortunately the key to this intensification of academic precarity is the very act that digital humanists often use to distinguish themselves from the traditional humanities: “making things.” Prior to, during, and since MLA11, one of the central ways in which practitioners of digital humanities have distinguished themselves from those who practice traditional humanities is based upon a distinction between making things and merely critiquing them. At MLA11, DH panels devoted a good deal of energy
to boundary drawing, which often depended on elucidating this distinction. In the panel called “The History and Future of Digital Humanities,” for example, I learned that I was not a digital humanist because I didn’t code (“Keeping a blog does not make you a digital humanist”) and because I didn’t “make things” (tell that to anyone who has labored for an hour or more over a single sentence). And while Stephen Ramsay has backed off of those claims since MLA 11, they still define one of the key differences between digital and traditional humanities.

Indeed, in the aftermath of MLA 11, this invidious distinction between making things and merely critiquing them has come to be one of the generally accepted differences that marks off DH from the humanities in general. As recently as September 2012, one could see this distinction at play in a brief Twitter exchange between Humanities, Arts, Science, and Technology Alliance and Collaboratory (HASTAC) cofounder Cathy Davidson and Vectors founding editor Tara McPherson. Responding to McPherson’s boundary-drawing “worry that much of theory/cult studies tends toward critique as end in itself,” Davidson quickly replies: “Could not agree more. Critique hard. New ideas much harder. Making stuff work really, really hard!” Consciously or not, McPherson and Davidson echo the instrumentalism of neoliberal administrators and politicians in devaluing critique (or by
extension any other humanistic inquiry that doesn’t make things) for being an end in itself as opposed to the more valuable and useful act “of making stuff work.” But perhaps even more interestingly, as movements such as #TransformDH have been articulating, it is the distinction between making things and doing more traditional scholarly work that perpetuates a class system within DH that generates an almost unbridgeable divide between those on the tenure-track, those in what have come to be called “alt-ac” positions, and those in even more precarious and temporary positions.

Sadly, this pattern continues to reproduce itself in the current explosion of mooc mania in print and online media, where much of the burgeoning interest in moocs has come from liberal administrators caught up in the convergence of neoliberal calculus and digital utopianism. At the same time that the market logic of neoliberalism has been used to decimate the mainstream humanities from within and without, this same logic has encouraged foundations, corporations, and university administrations to devote new resources to the digital humanities and, beginning this past year, to the development of moocs and other online forms of “content delivery.” If it is largely due to their instrumental or utilitarian value that university administrators, foundation officers, and government agencies are eager to fund DH projects, create DH undergraduate and graduate programs, and hire DH faculty, it is also the case that this neoliberal instrumentalism reproduces within the academy (in both traditional humanities and digital humanities alike) the precaritization of labor that marks the dark side of information capitalism in the twenty-first century.

Thus, to return to the questions with which this essay began, I would assert that it is no coincidence that the digital humanities has emerged as “the next big thing” at the very same moment in the first decades of the twenty-first century that the neoliberalization and corporatization of higher education has intensified. The category of “digital humanities” covers a diverse and heterogeneous range of projects, including but by no means limited to publishing, pedagogical, editorial, creative, and critical work, ranging from close individual attention to single texts to the creation of games and other interactive formats to the mining of big data for patterns imperceptible to the individual scholar. Taken as a whole, however, digital humanities reproduces structurally both within itself and among the humanities writ large the proliferation of temporary, precarious labor that has marked late twentieth- and twenty-first-century global capitalism. Substantive digital projects often entail collaborations between tenured and tenure-track faculty, students, and more precarious technical and nontechnical staff.
To avoid becoming obsolete, such projects will inevitably need ongoing or renewed support if they are to be updated or redone as new technologies continue to replace the technologies with which they were initially created. Furthermore, the distinction between making things and critiquing them that is often (but admittedly not always) deployed by DH scholars feeds into the widespread twenty-first-century belief that the primary (if not the only) reason one goes to college is to prepare for a job immediately after graduation—to be taught marketable skills. In light of the untenable burden of student debt generated both directly and indirectly by the reduction of government support for higher education in the past few decades, the pressure to obtain a well-paying job after graduation has increased dramatically. This is not to say that individual tenured and tenure-track faculty working in digital humanities necessarily share the neoliberal vision of higher education that leads academic administrators and public and private foundations to devote an increasing share of the limited resources for the humanities to DH projects and hires—indeed, many, most likely a significant majority, do not. It is, however, to say that institutional support for digital humanities by administrators, foundations, and legislators can work to conceal or compensate for reduced support given to the traditional humanities, and as such can contribute to the undermining of the liberal arts in higher education.

To hazard a probably ill-advised metaphor, I worry that digital humanities projects might serve as something like gateway drugs for administrators addicted to quick fixes and bottom-line approaches to the structural problems facing higher education today, providing them with the urge to experiment with moocs and other online forms of “content delivery,” which is how college courses are being increasingly defined by university administrators, government officials, and techno-utopians alike. Thus rather than encourage administrators to think that moocs and similar forms of “online content delivery” can substitute for traditional college courses, digital humanists should use their access to administrators and their increasing visibility to advocate for more intellectually responsible ways of integrating digital media into the humanities by providing models of digital humanities projects that are progressive both in terms of labor and scholarship. And they should do this even if, or perhaps precisely because, the creation of new forms of knowledge through digital mediation is more costly and requires more highly skilled and compensated labor than traditional classroom education. Consequently, it is important that digital humanists make a concerted effort to ensure that administrators, foundations, and legislatures are able to distinguish the scholarly goal of creating new modes
of knowledge production from the instrumental goal of delivering college education more cost effectively through the continued decimation of the tenured and tenure-track professoriate.

Digital humanists should stop (as many already have) making invidious distinctions between critique and production, between academic work pursued for its own ends and academic work that is instrumental for other ends. Such distinctions feed into the beliefs of administrators and state legislators that the humanities do not further what they take to be the chief (if not the only fundable) goal of a college education—training students for currently existing jobs (or for future ones). I would similarly encourage digital humanists not automatically to valorize collaborative over individual projects, or openly shared work over work done in private. It is crucial for the humanities to preserve the opportunity for students and scholars to work slowly, privately, and independently of the pressures of socially networked media to constantly update others on what one has just written or thought—if for no other reason than that the unquestioned emphasis on collaboration, openness, and sharing is aggressively marketed and sold by tech media companies to sell more devices and services and by corporate social media companies to generate massive data sets to be mined for purposes of commerce and security.

In order to counter the ongoing tendency toward defunding and devaluing the humanities, digital humanists need to consider (as many indeed already are) not only how new media technologies reshape or refashion what we mean by a humanities education in the twenty-first century but also how the humanities have always already been engaged with, indeed have coevolved with, technologies of mediation throughout their history. At least since I published “What Is an Electronic Author” in 1994, I have in my own work been committed to challenging the techno-utopian enthusiasm and revolutionary rhetoric promoted both by well-meaning academics and by the media and information technology industries. As Jay Bolter and I first argued with the initial publication of the essay “Remediation,” new media are most interesting for the way in which they refashion or remediate earlier media forms. Digital media can help to transform our understanding of the canon and history of the humanities by foregrounding and investigating the complex entanglements of humans and nonhumans, of humanities and technology, which have too often been minimized or ignored in conventional narratives of the Western humanistic tradition. Just as the digital humanities can help to redefine our traditional humanistic practices of history, critique, and interpretation, so these humanistic traditions can help to refine and
shape the direction and critical focus of digital humanities and its place in
the institutional infrastructure of the academy. In the face of the twenty-
first-century crisis in public funding for education, all humanists should be
working together to defend the value of humanistic inquiry in and of itself
from the instrumental logic and systematic defunding brought about by the
neoliberal assault on higher education.

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the Creation of America’s National Parks* (Cambridge University Press, 2004); with Jay David
Bolter, * Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press,
1999); and *Transcendentalist Hermeneutics: Institutional Authority and the Higher Criticism

Notes

1 One way for me to make sense of
this feeling of incommensurabil-
ity is to look to my own experience
as an academic administrator for
nearly twenty years: in Atlanta
during the dot.com bubble of the
late nineties, as director of under-
graduate studies and department
chair at Georgia Tech, and then to
my tenure as chair of English at
Wayne State University from 2001–
8, where I helped to establish a
digital literacy initiative and build
a strong English doctoral program
during a decade of economic disas-
ter in Michigan and record popula-
tion decline in the city of Detroit.
In a rough sense, these different
administrative experiences map
on to the competing moods in the
panels in which I participated at
MLA11. At MLA14, the employment
crisis, particularly the dramatic
increase in precarious labor,
dominated the affective space of
social media in advance of the
convention; this current structure
of feeling has been predominant in
Wisconsin since 2011, shortly after
I joined the University of Wis-
consin–Milwaukee in my current
position as director of the Center
for 21st Century Studies.

2 The question of tenure is one
that continues to concern digital
humanists. Just as tenure prob-
lems were created in the 1980s and
1990s (and persist in some places
today) for assistant professors
working in fields like deconstruc-
tion, feminism, postcolonialism,
or queer theory in departments
where more traditional or con-
servative scholars resisted work
in these areas as trendy, superfi-
cial, or lacking in rigor, so some
DHers are facing tenure problems
as a result of a similar discon-
nect—though these problems
take different forms. One of the
complaints circulating at MLA11
was that departments were hiring
entry-level digital humanists to do
digital work but telling candidates
at interviews that they would be
tenured based upon their scholarly
work—that they were still being
expected to have a book, for ex-
ample. Clearly such expectations
are unfair, but they are, I think,
understandable if we consider,
for example, something like the
following hypothetical situation.
Imagine a faculty member in literary and cultural studies or theory at a research university where digital humanities is emerging as a vital field. Imagine that this hypothetical faculty member teaches graduate seminars populated by students working in both digital and mainstream humanities and that this faculty member is directing the dissertations or serving on the dissertation committee of a couple of mainstream humanities students who performed at the top of his or her seminar but who are struggling to find a tenure-track position, even to get interviews for one. Imagine further that this faculty member sees that former members of his graduate seminars, whose critical or theoretical work was not the equal of his students, are prospering on the job market, garnering multiple MLA interviews while his or her students sit on the sideline. In such a scenario it is not difficult to imagine this faculty member feeling that this is unfair at the least, and perhaps criminal at worst. In a time of economic crisis, such feelings would only be exacerbated.

Given such an imaginary scenario, it is not difficult to imagine that when young digital humanists are coming up for tenure in this hypothetical faculty member’s own department, these feelings of resentment or injustice could lead this faculty member (consciously or not) to make unreasonable scholarly demands of these digital humanists, who have spent more of their time on the tenure clock coding or making things than developing their critical or theoretical publications.

Sometimes, the more enlightened version of this belief is that the liberal arts can train students to adapt themselves to changing labor conditions—but here, too, there is no question that the aim of higher education is to train students for jobs.

Works Cited


McPherson, Tara (@tmcpers). “I worry that much of theory/cult studies tends toward critique as end in itself; increasingly unsatisfied w/that.” 9 Sept. 2012, 6:36 p.m. Tweet.