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"Where is Cultural Criticism in the Digital Humanities"
http://liu.english.ucsb.edu/where-is-cultural-criticism-in-the-digital-humanities/

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This is the occasion to announce the new initiative titled 4Humanities: Advocating for the Humanities, which is subtitled "Powered by the International Digital Humanities Community." The site, which I and a collective of digital humanists in the U.S., Canada, U.K., and Australia started in November 2010 in the wake of discussion on the Humanist List about whether the digital humanities had become too "industrialised" and about the budget "cuts" in the United Kingdom, is a platform for advocacy statements for the humanities and other forms of showcasing the value of the humanities. The premise of the site is that the digital humanities have a special role to play today in helping the humanities communicate in contemporary media networks.

Let me read the first and last paragraphs from the Mission Statement of 4Humanities as a springboard for the thesis I want to offer about the future of the digital humanities:

4Humanities is a site created by the international community of digital humanities scholars and educators to assist in advocacy for the humanities. Government and private support for the humanities–for research, teaching, preservation, and creative renewal in such fields as literature, history, languages, philosophy, classics, art history, cultural studies, libraries, and so on–are in decline. In some nations, especially since the economic recession that started in 2007, the decline has resulted in major cuts in government and university funding. Leaders of society and business stake all the future on innovative and entrepreneurial discoveries in science, engineering, biomedicine, green technology, and so on. But the humanities contribute the needed perspective, training in complex human phenomena, and communication skills needed to spark, understand, and make "human" the new discoveries. In the process, they themselves discover new, and also very old, ways to be human. They do so through their unique contribution of the wisdom of the past, awareness of other cultures in the present, and imagination of innovative and fair futures. Many people care about the humanities, not just in the educational and cultural institutions directly affected by the recent cutbacks, but also in business, government, science, media, politics, the professions, and the general public. They believe that society will be poorer, not richer, without the humanities to help us grasp, and evolve, what it means to be "human" and "humane" in today's complex world.

4Humanities began because the digital humanities community–which specializes in making creative use of digital technology to advance humanities research and teaching as well as to think about the basic nature of the new media and technologies–woke up to its special potential and responsibility to assist humanities advocacy. The digital humanities are increasingly integrated in the humanities at large. They catch the eye of administrators and funding agencies who otherwise dismiss the humanities as yesterday's news. They connect across disciplines with science and engineering fields. They have the potential to use new technologies to help the humanities communicate with, and adapt to, contemporary society.

The thesis I offer today, which can be titled interrogatively "Where is Cultural Criticism in the Digital Humanities?," begins with the observation that the past-tense sentence embedded in the last paragraph here ("the digital humanities community . . . woke up to its special potential and responsibility to assist humanities advocacy") is actually still counter-factual. It's vaporware. In outline form, my thesis is as follows:

(1) In the digital humanities, cultural criticism–in both its interpretive and advocacy modes–has been noticeably absent by comparison with the mainstream humanities or, even more strikingly, with "new media studies" (populated as the latter is by net critics, tactical media critics, hacktivists, and so on). We digital humanists develop tools, data, metadata, and archives critically; and we have also developed critical positions on the nature of such resources (e.g., disputing whether computational methods are best used for truth-finding or, as Lisa Samuels and Jerome McGann put it, "deformation"). But rarely do we extend the issues involved into the register of society, economics, politics, or culture in the vintage manner, for instance, of the Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility (CPSR). How the digital humanities advance, channel, or resist the great postindustrial, neoliberal, corporatist, and globalist flows of information-cum-capital, for instance, is a question rarely heard in the digital humanities associations, conferences, journals, and projects with which I am familiar. Not even the clichéd forms of such issues–e.g., "the digital divide," "privacy," "copyright," and so on–get much play.

(2) Of course, cultural criticism in the humanities is not without its problems (some of which I have written about elsewhere and will not rehearse here). But I call special attention on the present occasion to the problem of the lack of cultural criticism in the digital humanities because I fear that this lack will stunt the growth of our field. I say this for two reasons.

One concerns how the digital humanities will henceforth contribute methodologically to the humanities at large. Consider, for example, that the table in literary studies has now been set for a broad debate between "close reading" and "distant reading." Several panels at last year's and this year's MLA bear on this debate (including the one this Sunday at noon titled "So Close and Yet So Far: Close Reading and Sociology"). The digital humanities have a place at this table, as emblematized, for instance, in the ongoing collaboration between Franco Moretti and Matthew Jockers at the Stanford Literature Lab. All those lonely decades of work on text analysis, text encoding, metadata protocols, and so on have finally earned digital humanists an invite to the main meal, just when all humanists are discovering that they have to digest, for example, Google's recently released Ngram analytics for 500 billion words.

But consider also the nature of the scholarly works that have so far had the greatest impact on the mainstream humanities in regard to the close reading vs. distant reading debate–to name just two instances: Moretti's *Graphs, Maps, Trees* and Pascale Casanova's *The World Republic of Letters*. Both these remarkable books embed their analytical methods within frames of cultural analysis–specifically, a threefold mix of Braudelian or *Annales* historiography, Marxist sociology (e.g., Casanova's Immanuel-Wallerstein-like center vs. periphery breakdown of the world literary system), and comparatism on a world or global scale. To my digital humanities colleagues in this room, let me say that, while we have the tools and the data, we will not even be in the same league as Moretti, Casanova, and others unless we can move seamlessly between text analysis and cultural analysis. After all, it can be said that digital materials on the scale of corpuses, databases, distributed repositories, and so on–some of the specialties of the digital humanities–are ipso facto cultural phenomena. Google says it; they call their Ngram interface to Google Books a contribution to "culturonomics." And new media studies says it; Lev Manovich and Jeremy Douglass at the UC San Diego Software Studies Program, for instance, are well-advanced in developing what they call "cultural analytics."Where are the digital humanists in the picture? To be an equal partner–-rather than, again, just a *servant*-–at the table, digital humanists will need to find ways to show that thinking critically about metadata, for instance, scales into thinking critically about the power, finance, and other governance protocols of the world.

Which brings me to my second reason for thinking that the lack of cultural criticism in the digital humanities might stunt the field's future growth. There is one servant role that I do not think the digital humanities should shirk as its unique contribution to the mainstream humanities: service (as literal as running the actual servers, if need be) toward advocating the humanities in its present moment of need, which is also the moment of immense changes in the communication and information networks connecting the humanities to the public for which traditional humanities communication forms (e.g., monographs) are poorly suited. Currently, the digital humanities are poised to make the jump from a niche field to a field-of-fields seen to affect research and teaching throughout the mainstream humanities. But joining the mainstream, I think, should not be the limit of our ambitions in the digital humanities. Truly to contribute, I believe, the digital humanities will need to show that it can also take a leadership role. The obvious leadership role at present is service for the cause of the humanities. Now that the humanities are being systematically or catastrophically defunded by nations, states, and universities, the digital humanities can best serve the humanities by helping it communicate in the new arena of networked and social public knowledge, helping it showcase its unique value, and helping it partner across disciplines with the STEM sciences in "grand challenge" projects deemed valuable by the public and its leaders. For example (and here I will conclude), there is not a single grand challenge announced by the Obama administration, the National Academy of Engineering, the Gates Foundation, and other agencies or foundations in the areas of energy, environment, biomedicine, food, water, education, and so on that does not require humanistic–and digital humanistic–involvement. All these issues have a necessary cultural dimension, whether as cause or effect, and all, therefore, need humanities and, increasingly, digital-humanities participants.