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What Is "Digital Humanities," and
Why Are They Saying Such Terrible Things about It?

I

*I*n the midst of the 2009 MLA Convention, *Chronicle of Higher Education* blogger William Pannapacker wrote, "Amid all the doom and gloom [. . .] one field seems to be alive and well: the digital humanities. More than that: Among all the contending subfields, the digital humanities seem like the first 'next big thing' in a long time, because the implications of digital technology affect every field." Two years later Pannapacker titled his MLA *Chronicle* column with the seemingly unnecessary interrogative "Digital Humanities Triumphant?" But would that more in life were so predictable as an academic dialectic: in 2013, Pannapacker's by-now anticipated convention coverage centered on "The Dark Side of the Digital Humanities," the special session event from which this journal issue derives.

I was not a participant on the panel, but I was in the crowded ballroom at the Boston Sheraton. The mood beforehand was festive, not contentious. Everyone was expecting a good show from the A-list speakers assembled. From somewhere up front the strains of the Star Wars Imperial March, made tinny by a laptop speaker, were accompanied by scattered laughter. Nonetheless, the issues raised and the charges leveled were of the

most serious order. Richard Grusin, who had convened the session, built toward an arresting summation: "I would assert that it is no coincidence that the digital humanities has emerged as 'the next big thing' at the same moment that the neoliberalization and corporatization of higher education has intensified in the first decades of the twenty-first century."

This short essay is not intended as a defense of digital humanities, not least because I don't think I disagree with Grusin, at least insofar as his articulation of the institutional environment that surrounds digital humanities is concerned. (I work in a university too, I have eyes, I have ears.) Yet next big thing or no, when it comes to digital humanities we are still only ever talking about someone's or several someones' work, the errors and limitations of which, whatever they may be in their particulars, should require no special forum or occasion for airing. So let me say it at the outset: everything produced by digital humanities—and I do mean every *thing*, every written, scripted, coded, or fabricated thing—in whatever its guise or form, medium or format, may be subject to criticism and critique on the basis of its methods, assumptions, expressions, and outcomes. All of that is completely normative and part of the routine conduct of academic disciplines.

Yet in the last couple of years events that are not normative or routine have occurred, and it is those events that we are addressing with this special journal issue and that were addressed at the MLA special session. These events, I would maintain, concern not the papers, projects, and other material pursuits of digital humanities—not the things of the digital humanities—but rather the advent of a *construct* of a "digital humanities."

Lest anyone think I am beginning with a semantic slip-slide, what I have just asserted is not only uncontroversial, it is also unoriginal, echoing as it does statements by the MLA session's invited participants. Wendy Chun, for example, insisted: "*But let me be clear, my critique is not directed at* DH *per se. DH* projects have extended and renewed the humanities and revealed that the kinds of critical thinking (close textual analysis) that the humanities have always been engaged in is and has always been central to crafting technology and society" (emphasis in original). By this account, then, DH "projects" have "extended and renewed" the humanities and have also helped historicize its activities in ways Chun finds salutary. Rita Raley, meanwhile, commenting afterward on the response to the session (which unfolded in real time on Twitter), is even more direct, noting: "[T]hough our roundtable referred in passing to actually existing projects, collectives, and games that we take to be affirmative and inspiring, the 'digital humanities' under analysis was a *discursive construction* and, I should

add, clearly noted as such throughout" (my emphasis). Whatever else we are talking about in this special issue, then, whatever else the MLA session was addressing itself to, and whatever else I am engaging in my contribution here, it is not the material conduct of digital humanities or, if you prefer, "actually existing projects," an especially clarifying phrase to keep in mind. It is, instead, and still in Raley's terms, a "discursive construction."

I have written about the existence of such a construct before, in two previous essays to which this, I suppose, contributes a third and final entry in an unanticipated trilogy. The first and most widely circulated of these, "What Is Digital Humanities and What's It Doing in English Departments?" began as an assignment for a 2010 Association of Departments of English meeting (hence the specificity of its address). I opened it by enjoining anyone truly interested in the first half of the titular question to Google it, or perhaps consult Wikipedia. At the time I was merely acting out my impatience, since whatever else one could say about digital humanities, there had been no shortage of writing seeking to define it, and so, as I put it then, "Whoever asks the question has not gone looking very hard for an answer." But my real point wasn't that Google or Wikipedia were the de facto authorities, but rather that they offered convenient portals to layers of consensus that are shaped, over time, by a community of interested persons. In other words, "digital humanities" was a construct, and the state of the construct could be more or less effectively monitored by checking in on its self-representations in aggregate. (The remainder of the piece did some historical spadework, excavating the actual origin of the term *digital humanities* and explaining why I thought English departments had—again, historically—been especially hospitable to its emergence.) But while the essay historicizes and characterizes DH, at no time does it actively define it; instead, in retrospect, here is what I see as its most clearly spoken moment:

> *Digital humanities has also, I would propose, lately been galva-*
> *nized by a group of younger (or not so young) graduate students,*
> *faculty members (both tenure line and contingent), and other*
> *academic professionals who now wield the label "digital humani-*
> *ties" instrumentally amid an increasingly monstrous institutional*
> *terrain defined by declining public support for higher education,*
> *rising tuitions, shrinking endowments, the proliferation of dis-*
> *tance education and the for-profit university, and, underlying it*
> *all, the conversion of full-time, tenure-track academic labor to a*
> *part-time adjunct workforce.*

I don't see this description of what I term a "monstrous" institutional terrain differing substantially from Grusin's view of where we are in the academy today. For several years thereafter, whenever asked to define digital humanities, my response was thus to say "a term of tactical convenience." The contention that "DH" was usefully understood as a tactical term, then, became the subject of the second of these two essays, a contention necessary in order to, as I next wrote, "insist on the reality of circumstances in which it ['digital humanities'] is unabashedly deployed to get things done—'things' that might include getting a faculty line or funding a staff position, establishing a curriculum, revamping a lab, or launching a center" ("Digital" 415).

That second piece does some further historical work, examining in detail one such tactical deployment of DH at one specific institution, and also, in a separate section, attempting to delineate how "DH," as a signifier, was increasingly operationalized algorithmically on the network, actively mobilized via hashtags and metadata. This essay has been criticized by Brian Lennon on the grounds that "tactical," if read to follow de Certeau's usage, invokes an outsider position that DH can no longer (or indeed, ever) claim the luxury of inhabiting; that DH is, rather, a strategic formation complicit with the state, or at the very least, complicit with the aims of conniving deans and administrators and foundation officers who are actively seeking to dismantle the bare, ruined choirs of the professoriate. As I previously responded: "[F]or those of us who have [built] centers/programs/curricula/what-have-you one proposal, one hire, one lecture series, one grant, one server, one basement room at a time, the institutional interiority and strategic complicity of digital humanities seems perhaps equally unpersuasive" (Comment). Be that as it may. Why write a third piece on the topic?

While questions about digital humanities did not originate with the 2013 MLA, that moment does seem to me to mark the onset of an increasingly aggressive challenge that deserves recognition, and response. Some elements of that challenge, like the MLA session or this journal issue, assume conventional shapes and forms that will be familiar to the uninitiated and easily processed. Others, like blog entries (perhaps with comments appended), are also increasingly accepted as part of the space of our conversations, a gray literature that requires only a link passed in an email or on Facebook to access and assimilate. Yet other maneuvers have unfolded in more hermetic environments, largely inaccessible to outsiders, defined especially by Twitter but more specifically by the interaction between Twitter and other online services (including Facebook and blogs), the result being a complex, always evolving ecology that rewards the 24/7 attention cycle.

This particular discourse network is characterized by subtle layers of indirection and innuendo (sometimes called "subtweets" for subliminal tweets, i.e., oblique commentaries in which particular individuals may or may not recognize themselves), a kind of social steganography (danah boyd's term) whose stratifications render individual agendas transparent to the initiated and opaque to the neophyte. While no one can be plugged in all the time, for a number of the contributors to this issue these discussions form a normative part of their routines, an extension or facet of their critical engagement over the course of a day as the feed refreshes and the notifications chime. (I pause for these details because online speech denaturalizes the register of the discourse here; and I lay emphasis on them to break down the dualism between the landscape of social media and traditional venues of professional record, like a Duke University Press journal.)

If you follow the right Twitter accounts, then, if you read the right blogs, if you're on the right lists, and if you're included in the right backchannels . . . if you do these things, you'll be within your rights to wonder (all over again) what "digital humanities" *is* anyway, and why on earth *anyone* would want it in their English (or any other) department.

Herewith, then, are some of the terrible things of my title, hardly any of which are exaggerated for effect: Digital humanities is a nest of big data ideologues. Digital humanities digs MOOCs. Digital humanities is an artifact of the post-9/11 security and surveillance state (the NSA of the MLA). Like Johnny, digital humanities can't read. Digital humanities doesn't do theory. Digital humanities *never* historicizes. Digital humanities is complicit. Digital humanities is naive. Digital humanities is hollow huckster boosterism. Digital humanities is managerial. Digital humanities is the academic import of Silicon Valley solutionism (the term that is the shibboleth of bad-boy tech critic Evgeny Morozov). Digital humanities cannot abide critique. Digital humanities appeals to those in search of an oasis from the concerns of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Digital humanities does not inhale (easily the best line of the bunch). Digital humanities wears Google Glass. Digital humanities wears thick, thick glasses (guilty). Perhaps most damning of all: digital humanities is something separate from the rest of the humanities, and—this is the real secret—digital humanities *wants* it that way.[1]

Terrible things indeed these are! But while terrible can mean repugnant, the etymology of the word (Greek *treëin*, "to tremble") also encompasses that which is terrific, by which we can mean possessed of great intensity (see also contemporary French usage). It is not then so

inappropriate to be saying "terrible" things about "digital humanities" at this particular moment, a moment when the institutions we inhabit are indeed at the epicenter of seismic shifts in attitude, means, and mission. But we should be clear about exactly what it is we are addressing with these terrible allegations: we are (almost always) addressing and investing a construct, a construct that is variously journalistic (note the straight line from Grusin's MLA comments to Pannapacker), administrative, algorithmic, and opportunistic (for which one might read, yes, tactical). Collectively, and above all else, it is discursive, as Raley so astutely noted. The very orthographic contours of "digital humanities" have been subject to unprecedented scrutiny: not long ago, William Germano, now Dean of Humanities and Social Sciences at Cooper Union, pronounced upon "[t]he spectacular rise of 'DH' as the most powerful digraph in the non-STEM academy." It is appropriate that Germano, editor-in-chief for twenty years at Columbia University Press prior to his Cooper Union appointment, selects exactly the right term of art here. The digraph "DH"—variously also dh/DH/D_H/#dh as well as #transformdh and #dhpoco—is especially conspicuous on Twitter, where it functions not only as economical shorthand but also, as I have noted previously, as a hashtag—metadata—to be operationalized through search engines, aggregators, and notification services. The orthographic (and very often orthogonal) tensions around digital humanities—is it *the* digital humanities or just "digital humanities," is it capitalized or not capitalized—are further emblematic in this regard.

The agon par excellence of the construct is of course the question of definition: what *is* digital humanities? The insistence on the question is what allows the construct to do its work, to function as a space of contest for competing agendas. But more importantly—and this is precisely where the logic of the construct most readily reveals itself—there is no actual shortage of definitions of digital humanities. They are, by contrast, always latent and very often explicit in every curriculum and program proposal, every search committee charge and hiring brief, every grant application and book project that sees fit to invoke the term. The definitions may not align, indeed they may at times prove inimical to one another. But variegation is not the same as absence or ineffability, and so we may conclude that the continued insistence on definition is precisely what allows the construct to function as a self-evident given, perpetuating itself through brute repetition and the proliferation of localized, sometimes media-specific digraphic focalizers.

You may recall that the Construct was also the name given to the self-contained emulation of the Matrix in the Wachowskis' films, the

dojo where Neo spars with Morpheus to hone his kung fu technique. The construct in this sense is overtly a place of ritualized (and dematerialized) contest. This is not incidental to the sense in which I use it here, literalizing the meaning of the term beyond (I am sure) Raley's intentions. In the construct, the habitus of social media disrupts the traditional comity of academic exchange. Just as Neo learns to bend—hack—the physics of his programmed reality, here one bends collegial niceties in competition for hits, retweets, likes, and replies, the very stuff—the *Fu*, in Internet parlance—of such odious reputation trackers as Klout. Indeed, we know that when this journal issue is published its availability will be widely tweeted. Brief excerpts from the essays (140 characters, remember) will circulate on Twitter. Blog posts characterizing or responding to the essays at greater length will appear; the essays themselves may be uploaded to personal sites or institutional repositories by their authors. The authors and others will engage one another in the tweets and blog comments. All of this will happen over a course of days, weeks, and months. While the records of those responses will linger thereafter on the Web, they will be mute remainders, mere husks, of the frisson, the serotonin- and caffeine-fueled jags that propel real-time online exchange. Only much more slowly will these essays pass into the collected professional literature, where they will be indexed, quoted, and referenced in the usual way. This issue on the dark side of the "digital humanities" is itself an artifact (an *issue*) of the construct and will serve to sustain it, not least through (again) the cascade of agonistic reductionism that will inevitably characterize those engaging it through channels of metrical (that is, reputation-based) circulation on social media.

Metrical, and often brutal. Brutalism, or what some have dubbed the rhetoric of contempt, like ex cathedra pronouncement and aphorism, is a recognized online interactive mode, and the take-down is its consummate expression as genre and form. Such is in fact the signature style of Evgeny Morozov, the caustic technology critic whose first book was titled *The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom* (2011). Morozov, as much as the dark sides of Star Wars or Pink Floyd, furnishes the referential framing for the current debate. He enters the scene as one of the most visible and vociferous critics of Silicon Valley, and indeed, "the Internet," a macro-construct whose artifice he emphasizes by insisting on its embrace with quotation marks. The critique, honed on the whetstone of personal contact and up-close immersion in the day-to-day doings of the technoratti (see, for example, his 15,000 words on Tim O'Reilly in *The Baffler*), is aimed at

technological essentialism and technological determinism, and above all idealism—what Morozov brands *solutionism*—which his second book, *To Save Everything Click Here*, effectively demolishes. As a break-out public intellectual, Morozov is in his element online, cultivating an uncompromising, acerbic persona (his Twitter bio reads simply: "There are idiots. Look around"). The transposition to digital humanities by some of his followers was predictable: DHers are themselves solutionists, pretenders who arrive to fix the ills of the present-day academy with tools, apps, and the rhetorical equivalent of TED talks, all driven by a naive (and duplicitous) agenda that has its roots if not (yet) in an IPO then in the academic currency of jobs, funding, and tenure. But this is poor critique and worse history, suggesting, as it does, that the differences between venture capital and public institutions are, quite literally, immaterial. Digital humanities in the United States at least has its beginnings not in California and not (for the most part) on the Ivy campuses, but mostly in eastern land-grant institutions. When a full documentary and archivally sound history of "digital humanities" is written, it will have to take into account the idiosyncrasies of this particular class of institution, and these will, I think, reveal a very different set of contexts than Silicon Valley's orchards, lofts, and technology parks.

Charges of brutalism and lack of civility are de facto subject to infinite regress, for the very charges become the object of brutal ridicule, and the cycle perpetuates. But at some level it should be uncontroversial to observe that many of the terrible things uttered about "digital humanities" as a construct simply lack an elemental generosity, as if there were no critical (let alone ethical) distinctions obtainable between data mining a corpus of nineteenth-century fiction and data mining your telephone calling records, as if those who "do" DH haven't been educated in the same critical traditions (indeed, sometimes in the same graduate programs) as their opponents, as if those who do DH aren't also politically committed and politically engaged, and as if they don't (as a result) typically find Morozov himself both amusing and smart and profoundly uncontroversial. (And you will not convince me otherwise: here, I unapologetically rely on my own stores of anecdote and personal interaction, on conversations and relationships that go back in some cases decades, to make these determinations.) To indulge "digital humanities" only ever as a construct and a site of contestation is also thus to give in to a world view that seems to me precisely neoliberal, precisely zero sum and agonistic—disembodied, desocialized, and evacuated of materiality or material history.

II

I am finishing this essay in the weeks immediately following the conclusion of the Digital Humanities 2013 conference, held in Lincoln, Nebraska. DH13 was this year's conference of record for the Alliance of Digital Humanities Organizations (ADHO), first formed in 2005 as an administrative entity shared by two scholarly associations, the predominantly North American Association for Computing and the Humanities and the predominantly European Association for Literary and Linguistic Computing, which have themselves been holding joint conferences since 1989 and individually since the early 1970s. Today ADHO encompasses six constituent organizations, also including the Canadian Society for Digital Humanities/Société pour l'étude des médias interactifs (SDH-SEMI, now SDH/SCHN), the Australasian Association for Digital Humanities (AADH), centerNet: An International Network of Digital Humanities Centers, and the Japanese Association for Digital Humanities (JADH). I mention these particulars to place two sets of facts before us: one, that digital humanities, even in its current configuration (what Steve Ramsay has dubbed "DH Type 2"), has a history going back nearly a decade (and, as "humanities computing," much longer than that), and two, that digital humanities has become thoroughly internationalized. Indeed, an attendee at the 2013 conference might have heard papers such as "Uncovering the 'Hidden Histories' of Computing in the Humanities 1949–1980: Findings and Reflections on the Pilot Project" or "Authorship Problem[s] of Japanese Early Modern Literatures in Seventeenth Century." Or else papers like "Are Google's Linguistic Prosthesis Biased toward Commercially More Interesting Expressions? A Preliminary Study on the Linguistic Effects of Autocompletion Algorithms" or "The Digitized Divide: Mapping Access to Subscription-Based Digitized Resources" or "Against the Binary of Gender: A Case for Considering the Many Dimensions of Gender in DH Teaching and Research."

While the conference is heavily attended by humanities faculty and graduate students, it also includes significant representation from information studies, computer science, and library and archives professionals, as well as the so-called alt-ac space. Consequently, critical methods, assumptions, and discourse networks do not always align, even within the same panel; for every scrupulously written and carefully read paper citing Judith Butler or Bruno Latour, there were slide decks with data sets, graphs, and bullet points. If definition is the first great agon of the construct, inclusion and extent—who's in, who's out—is the second. The stakes are obvious:

when a federal funding agency flies the flag of the digital humanities, one is incentivized to brand their work as digital humanities. When an R1 university does a cluster hire in digital humanities, one is incentivized to be on the market as a digital humanist. When a digital humanities center has institutional resources, one is incentivized to seek to claim them by doing DH. None of this is disingenuous or cynical, nor can anyone who has looked in detail at the history of academic disciplines think digital humanities is in any way exceptional with regard to dependencies between its intellectual currency and bottom-line ways and means. Yet we frequently ignore these institutionalized realities in favor of an appeal to the "digital humanities" construct, as though the construct (and not the institution) were the desired locus of our agency and efficacy. In fact, digital humanists are recognized in the same way as individuals working in other fields: by doing work that is recognizable as digital humanities.

My publishing in *difference*s does not make me a scholar of feminist cultural studies; were I to wish to have myself considered as such, though, I *would* seek to publish in *difference*s (and kindred venues), and I would develop my work within a network of citations recognizable to the already active participants who are publishing and speaking and teaching in that area with the goal of being listened to by them. In time, if my contributions had merit, they might be taken up and cited by others and thus assimilated into an ongoing conversation. So it is with digital humanities: you are a digital humanist if you are listened to by those who are already listened to as digital humanists, and they themselves got to be digital humanists by being listened to by others. Jobs, grant funding, fellowships, publishing contracts, speaking invitations—these things do not make one a digital humanist, though they clearly have a material impact on the circumstances of the work one does to get listened to. Put more plainly, if my university hires me as a digital humanist and if I receive a federal grant (say) to do such and such a thing that is described as digital humanities and if I am then rewarded by my department with promotion for having done it (not least because outside evaluators whom my department is enlisting to listen to as digital humanists have attested to its value to the digital humanities), then, well, yes, I am a digital humanist. Can you be a digital humanist without doing those things? Yes, if you want to be, though you may find yourself being listened to less unless and until you do *some thing* that is sufficiently noteworthy that reasonable people who themselves do similar things must account for your work, your thing, as part of the progression of a shared field of interest. That is what being a digital humanist is; it is almost all of what

being a digital humanist is. And while the material particulars of the work may vary in certain respects, including some very consequential respects, it is different not at all from being a Victorianist or a feminist cultural studies scholar or a scholar of Victorian feminist cultural studies.

Digital humanists don't want to extinguish reading and theory and interpretation and cultural criticism. Digital humanists want to do their work. They want jobs and (if the job includes the opportunity for it) they want tenure and promotion. They (often) want to teach. They (often) want to publish. They want to be heard. They want professional recognition and stability, whether as contingent labor, ladder faculty, graduate students, or in "alt-ac" settings. In short, they want pretty much the same things that every working academic wants, and the terrible truth is that they go about it in more or less familiar ways that include teaching, publishing, and administration. Take, for example, Matthew Jockers, a collaborator and past colleague of Franco Moretti, he who gave us the term *distant reading*: now Jockers is on the English faculty at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, an institution that has developed an exceptionally strong capacity in digital humanities (hence its hosting the recent conference). If anybody is "in" DH, surely it is Jockers. He has recently published a book titled *Macroanalysis: Digital Methods and Literary History* as part of the University of Illinois Press's Topics in the Digital Humanities series. In one early chapter, over the span of about a page, Jockers deploys a sequence of metaphors gleaned from strip mining to articulate his work's relation to the literary history of his subtitle:

> *[W]hat is needed now is the equivalent of open-pit mining or hydraulicking. [. . .] Close reading, traditional searching, will continue to reveal nuggets, while the deeper veins lie buried beneath the mass of gravel layered above. What are required are the methods for aggregating and making sense out of both the nuggets and the tailings [. . .] [to] exploit the trammel of computation to process, condense, deform, and analyze the deeper strata from which these nuggets were born, to unearth, for the first time, what these corpora really contain. (9–10)*

I am quoting selectively, and elsewhere Jockers develops his argument along paths more subtle, perhaps more comfortable, than mountaintop removal. But that's secondary to my point, which is that to receive even such passages as these with the agonistic zero-sum view that the author seeks to somehow

eradicate traditional close reading and interpretation makes sense *only* in the construct.

The facts, after all, are these: Jockers's book was published in late 2012 with a print run of such and such. It will be bought by university libraries and some number of individuals. Some fewer number of those who bought it will read it. It will be reviewed in some number of venues, though the reviews will fall off after the first few years as they always do. Eventually (we do not know when) it will go out of print. It will be cited, by how many we do not yet know. It will be assigned, to how many classes we do not yet know. It will inspire some number of students, some fraction of whom may perhaps go to Nebraska, to work with Jockers.

At some point the approaches in the book may pass out of fashion, and it may thus appear dated or naive. At some point the approaches may become more widespread, in which case the book will appear prescient and wise. Regardless, the book will do what almost all serious books do, albeit to greater or lesser extents: contribute to a conversation. Right now there is an especially lively such conversation around how we read. My colleague Lee Konstantinou has been collecting the different modalities; besides close and distant, his list includes also uncritical reading (Michael Warner), reparative reading (Eve Sedgwick), generous reading (Timothy Bewes), disintegrated reading (Rita Raley), surface reading (Sharon Best and Stephen Marcus; also Heather Love), and the hermeneutics of situation (Chris Nealon and Jeffrey Nealon). Jockers's interventions in *Macroanalysis* have precisely *no* chance of displacing or discouraging *any* of these other modes of reading even if such were his intent, which it manifestly is not. Jockers does not wish for us all to become text miners and for none of us to read symptomatically or generously or reparatively; he likely wishes for *more* of us to mine texts (surely that is a motive in writing the book), and then talk to those who read reparatively and generously and closely (surely *that* is the motive in doing the mining). None of this differs in any substantial way from the publication of a special journal issue collecting papers from a group of scholars around an intervention such as "surface reading," for example.

Let me offer an example from another quarter. Peter Robinson, who has had a long and distinguished career as an editorial theorist and textual scholar, has lately been giving papers in which he purports to explain "[w]hy digital humanists should get out of textual scholarship. And if they don't, why we textual scholars should throw them out." Robinson's argument is predicated on the belief that digital humanists build tools and that textual studies now more or less has all the tools it needs to go about its work, which

is that of making critical editions (electronic or otherwise). He ends with this: "We may use digital humanities to be better textual scholars, but we do not pretend to be digital humanists. In return, digital humanists might also declare: we do digital humanities, and we try to help textual scholars to be better textual scholars through digital humanities, but we do not pretend to be textual scholars." There are many ways in which one might seek to answer Robinson, starting with the assumption that digital humanities is confined to the activity of tool building. But we can also say this: Robinson's concluding statement is a catechism that makes sense *only* in the construct, that virtual discursive space where Morpheus and Neo (who are both really on the same side, remember) can battle without regard for bodies, history, or physics. Outside of the construct, Robinson's statement has no sense, indeed, no context. It speaks to *no body*. Why? Because it presumes the existence of entities called "digital humanities" (or for that matter "textual scholarship") that exist apart from the practices of the people who identify with them. (To be sure, there are exemplars of digital humanists who have no great interest in textual scholarship just as there are textual scholars who have no investments in the digital humanities—but these individual cases merely reflect the reality of individual choices and careers, not the fractal coastlines of some metadisciplinary geography exposed at low tide.)

Robinson is thus making a purely discursive move in a purely discursive space. Put more plainly, it is not as if one could sit in the audience and hear his talk and say, "Yes, Robinson has this right, and so I will return to my campus and dissociate digital humanities from textual scholarship forthwith." Indeed, Robinson himself clearly knows this, since the most tangible action items in his paper refer to the material circumstances of scholarly production: copyrights, costs, the quality of markup and metadata, and the interoperability of tools. In any case, Robinson's positions would have been unimaginable just a few years ago, before the first large-scale deployments of the "digital humanities" construct, not because there are no intellectual distinctions to be drawn between what digital humanities does and what textual scholarship does, but rather because the number of actual people—outside the construct—who would wish to concern themselves with the things Robinson concerns himself with who do not *also* have a history and identity in the "digital humanities" is nowadays vanishingly small.

I have written as I have to suggest neither that all dark side critiques are disingenuous nor that any questioning of "digital humanities" is universally reducible to a construct. Of course one should ask questions about any set of disciplinary practices that have been as visible and

prodigious as digital humanities in recent years. And the construct serves its purpose too; reductionism is often nothing more (and nothing less) than a concession to the limitations of the human capacity for attention. Indeed, the formation of discursive constructs around areas of critical engagement is itself entirely normative (see, for example, "New Historicism" or "Romanticism"); Brian McHale once chose exactly that phrase—discursive construct—to characterize "postmodernism" (4–5). Thus it is also not surprising that "DHers" themselves have written innumerable statements that contribute to the construct's formation and perpetuation. But it is also necessary and appropriate to draw attention to what seems to me to be a recent and particular and peculiarly conspicuous set of moves, those suggested by the serial repetition of qualifying language seeking to establish discursive distance between critiques of "digital humanities" as such and those addressed to individual projects and productions. Drawing attention to that move (I have sought to do this typographically through my own use of quotation marks around "digital humanities," much as Morozov insists on "the Internet") ought to remind us of the limits of critique when critique is exercised according to recognizable and repeatable (and procedural) stances. So-called dark side critiques could therefore productively probe the "digital humanities" construct in relation to what we know of prior academic discursive formations, an inquiry remarkably absent from those critiques to date despite their own charges that "digital humanities" is not sufficiently invested in its histories. Moreover, critiques of "digital humanities" can ameliorate the construct (as opposed to indulging its brutal and metric perpetuation) by acknowledging—historically, materially—that "digital humanities" is in fact a diversified set of practices, one whose details and methodologies responsible critique has a responsibility to understand and engage.

Such I would dearly like to see, for it is needed not just by "digital humanities" but by the constituencies *of* the humanities. Recent revelations notwithstanding, we cannot proceed as though such suddenly public phenomena as "metadata" or "data mining" are simply the calling cards of the state. I know of at least one exemplar already at hand. I am thinking of Alan Liu's essay "The Meaning of the Digital Humanities" in the March 2013 issue of *pmla*. Given the title, one could be forgiven for expecting the usual bout with definitions and measures of inclusion. But the essay offers little in that regard. It makes a remarkably novel move instead: a close reading (if you will) of one particular digital humanities project, specifically, a paper published out of Stanford University's Literary Lab based on experiments with computational analysis of a data corpus. In focusing his address on

the research reported in this one paper, Liu hews very close to the science and technology studies (STS) approach that I believe offers the best basis for relevant critique of and in the digital humanities, a critique focused around the illumination of the antecedents, assumptions, and material dependencies of particular tools, methods, parentages of mentoring, and institutional settings. Digital humanities, after all, is sometimes said to suffer from physics envy. Let us, then, take that as it may be and avail ourselves of a singularly powerful intellectual precedent for examining in close (yes, microscopic) detail the material conditions of knowledge production in scientific settings or configurations. Let us read citation networks and publication venues. Let us examine the usage patterns around particular tools. Let us treat the *recensio* of data sets.

Liu gives us a more-than-passing glimpse of what all this may look like: he undertakes to correspond, for example, with the managing editor of the *Historical Thesaurus of the Oxford English Dictionary* (HTOED), a reference whose data furnishes the main ingredient in what Liu terms an essential "adjustment step" in the authors' methodology. Liu, a master reader, rightly recognizes this as the crux of the narrative he is unspooling, and so he follows the thread to the source in order to expose the implications of the dependencies to the HTOED. Liu further notes that the HTOED, though historically "precomputational," is not "pretechnological" and has in fact been implemented and transposed through a series of online databases since its origins in the 1960s; it thus (now) manifests a rich range of media archaeological layers. The essay succeeds not only because it offers up a critique with which we may better see the contributions and limits of a particular project but also because it is actively interested in—I would go so far as to say fascinated by—digital humanities. Liu, in short, seeks to give us the digital humanities *in action*, and so he sites critique amid the evidentiary details of data sets and databases and algorithms, as well as literary historical interpretation and disciplinary knowledge.[2]

In previous essays, I've described digital humanities as both a "methodological outlook" ("What Is") and as a "tactical term" ("Digital"). In closing, I will be as plain as I can be: we will never know what digital humanities "is" because we don't want to know nor is it useful for us to know. John Unsworth, who may well have written the foundational naming document for digital humanities (given as a talk on May 25, 2001), introduced digital humanities as a "concession" arrived at for want of other, different terms. From that very day, we were already in the construct, a *concession* that exists to consolidate and propagate vectors of ambiguity, affirmation,

and dissent.[3] Regardless, there is one thing that digital humanities ineluctably *is*: digital humanities is work, somebody's work, somewhere, some *thing*, always. We know how to talk about work. So let's talk about this work, in action, this actually existing work.

Notes

1   This paragraph consolidates and paraphrases (but exaggerates hardly at all) a number of ongoing discourses around digital humanities, principally online. Those wishing to reconstruct the particular sources that inspired me (which are by no means coextensive with the totality of the "dark side" critique) are advised to consult the following. For digital humanities as big data ideology (and antitheoretical/historical/ hermeneutical/critical), see the 2012–13 Twitter feeds of David Golumbia and Brian Lennon. See also the various entries in the "digital humanities" category on Golumbia's *Uncomputing* blog. For digital humanities and MOOCs, see (if only as a starting point) Grusin. For digital humanities and the post-9/11 surveillance state, see (esp.) Lennon on Twitter. For digital humanities as managerial see Allington. For Morozov worship, see (again) Golumbia and Lennon (Twitter). "Digital humanities never once inhaled" is from Alan Liu's trenchant essay "Where Is Cultural Criticism in the Digital

Humanities?" For an extensive discussion around race, class, gender, sexuality, and disability—and the extent to which DH is or is not a refuge from them all—see Smith and Koh and Risam, including comments. Though this accounting is not exhaustive, a reader who spends any length of time with these sources (including also comments, replies, and the other dialogic features of online expression) will, I think, see voiced most if not all of the "terrible things" I seek here to address.

2   Fred Gibbs, reacting to an earlier essay of Liu's, has also delineated the need for such a situated critique. He asserts, "[D]igital humanities criticism needs to go beyond typical peer review and inhabit a genre of its own—a critical discourse, a kind of scholarship in its own right."

3   That mere definitions of digital humanities are commonplace and easy to come by—Ashgate has now devoted a reader to collecting them—only accentuates the point. See Terras, Nyhan, and Vanhoutte.

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