

Working the Digital Humanities: Uncovering Shadows between the Dark and the Light

*T*he following is an exchange between the two authors in response to a paper given by Chun at the “Dark Side of the Digital Humanities” panel at the 2013 Modern Languages Association (MLA) Annual Convention. This panel, designed to provoke controversy and debate, succeeded in doing so. However, in order to create a more rigorous conversation focused on the many issues raised and elided and on the possibilities and limitations of digital humanities as they currently exist, we have produced this collaborative text. Common themes in Rhody’s and Chun’s responses are: the need to frame digital humanities within larger changes to university funding and structure, the importance of engaging with uncertainty and the ways in which digital humanities can elucidate “shadows” in the archive, and the need for and difficulty of creating alliances across diverse disciplines.

We hope that this text provokes more ruminations on the future of the university (rather than simply on the humanities) and leads to more wary, creative, and fruitful engagements with digital technologies that are increasingly shaping the ways and means by which we think.

Part 1
The Digital Humanities:
A Case of Cruel Optimism? (Chun)

What follows is the talk given by Wendy Chun on January 4, 2013, at the MLA convention in Boston. It focuses on a paradox between the institutional hype surrounding DH and the material work conditions that frequently support it (adjunct/soft money positions, the constant drive to raise funds, the lack of scholarly recognition of DH work for promotions). Chun calls for scholars across all fields to work together to create a university that is fair and just for all involved (teachers, students, researchers). She also urges us to find value in what is often discarded as “useless” in order to take on the really hard problems that face us.

I want to start by thanking Richard Grusin for organizing this roundtable. I’m excited to be a part of it. I also want to start by warning you that we’ve been asked to be provocative, so I’ll use my eight minutes here today to provoke: to agitate and perhaps aggravate, excite and perhaps incite. *For today, I want to propose that the dark side of the digital humanities is its bright side, its alleged promise*—its alleged promise to save the humanities by making them and their graduates relevant, by giving their graduates technical skills that will allow them to thrive in a difficult and precarious job market. Speaking partly as a former engineer, this promise strikes me as bull: knowing GIS (geographic information systems) or basic statistics or basic scripting (or even server-side scripting) is not going to make English majors competitive with engineers or CS (computer science) geeks trained here or increasingly abroad. (*Straight up programming jobs are becoming increasingly less lucrative.*) *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. DH projects such as Feminist Dialogues in Technology, a distributed online cooperative course that will be taught in fifteen universities across the globe, and other similar courses that use technology not simply to disseminate but also to cooperatively rethink and regenerate education on a global scale—these projects are central. In addition, the humanities should play a big role in big data, not simply because we’re good at pattern recognition (because we can read narratives embedded in data) but also, and more importantly, because we can see what big data ignores. We can see the ways in which so many big data projects, by restricting themselves to certain databases and terms, shine a flashlight under a streetlamp.

I also want to stress that my sympathetic critique is not aimed at the humanities, but at the general euphoria surrounding technology and education. That is, it takes aim at the larger project of rewriting political and pedagogical problems into technological ones, into problems that technology can fix. This rewriting ranges from the idea that moocs (massive open online courses), rather than a serious public commitment to education, can solve the problem of the spiraling costs of education (moocs that enroll but don't graduate; moocs that miss the point of what we do, for when lectures work, they work because they create communities, because they are, to use Benedict Anderson's phrase, "extraordinary mass ceremonies") to the blind embrace of technical skills. To put it as plainly as possible: there are a lot of unemployed engineers out there, from forty-something assembly programmers in Silicon Valley to young kids graduating from community colleges with cs degrees and no jobs. Also, there's a huge gap between industrial skills and university training. Every good engineer has to be retaught how to program; every film graduate, retaught to make films.

My main argument is this: the vapid embrace of the digital is a form of what Lauren Berlant has called "cruel optimism." Berlant argues, "[A] relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing" (1). She emphasizes that optimistic relations are not inherently cruel, but become so when "the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially." Crucially, this attachment is doubly cruel "insofar as the very pleasures of being inside a relation have become sustaining regardless of the content of the relation, such that a person or world finds itself bound to a situation of profound threat that is, at the same time, profoundly confirming" (2).

So, *the blind embrace of DH* (*think here of Stanley Fish's "The Old Order Changeth"*) allows us to believe that this time (once again) graduate students will get jobs. *It allows us to believe that the problem facing our students and our profession is a lack of technical savvy rather than an economic system that undermines the future of our students.*

As Berlant points out, the hardest thing about cruel optimism is that, even as it destroys us in the long term, it sustains us in the short term. DH allows us to tread water: to survive, if not thrive. (*Think here of the ways in which so many DH projects and jobs depend on soft money and the ways in which DH projects are often—and very unfairly—not counted toward tenure or promotion.*) It allows us to sustain ourselves and to justify our existence in an academy that is increasingly a sinking ship.

The humanities are sinking—if they are—not because of their earlier embrace of theory or multiculturalism, but because they have capitulated to a bureaucratic technocratic logic. They have conceded to a logic, an enframing (*to use Heidegger's term*), that has made publishing a question of quantity rather than quality, so that we spew forth MPUS or minimum publishable units; a logic, an enframing, that can make teaching a burden rather than a mission, so that professors and students are increasingly at odds; a logic, an enframing, that has divided the profession and made us our own worst enemies, so that those who have jobs for life deny jobs to others—others who have often accomplished more than they (than we) have.

The academy is a sinking ship—if it is—because it sinks our students into debt, and this debt, generated by this optimistic belief that a university degree automatically guarantees a job, is what both sustains and kills us. This residual belief/hope stems from another time, when most of us couldn't go to university, another time, when young adults with degrees received good jobs not necessarily because of what they learned, but because of the society in which they lived.

Now, if the bright side of the digital humanities is the dark side, let me suggest that the dark side—what is now considered to be the dark side—may be where we need to be. The dark side, after all, is the side of passion. The dark side, or what has been made dark, is what all that bright talk has been turning away from (critical theory, critical race studies—all that fabulous work that #TransformDH is doing).

This dark side also entails taking on our fears and biases to create deeper collaborations with the sciences and engineering. It entails forging joint (frictional and sometimes fractious) coalitions to take on problems such as education, global change, and so on. It means realizing that the humanities don't have a lock on creative or critical thinking and that research in the sciences can be as useless as research in the humanities—and that this is a good thing. It's called basic research.

It also entails realizing that what's most interesting about the digital in general is perhaps not what has been touted as its promise, but rather, what's been discarded or decried as its trash. (*Think here of all those failed DH tools, which have still opened up new directions.*) It entails realizing that what's most interesting is what has been discarded or decried *as inhuman*: rampant publicity, anonymity, the ways in which the Internet vexes the relationship between public and private, the ways it compromises our autonomy and involves us with others and other machines in ways we don't entirely know and control. (*Think here of the constant and

promiscuous exchange of information that drives the Internet, something that is usually hidden from us.*)

As Natalia Cecire has argued, DH is best when it takes on the humanities, as well as the digital. *Maybe, just maybe, by taking on the inhumanities, we'll transform the digital as well.*

Thank you.

The sections in asterisks are either points implied in my visuals or in the talk, which I have elaborated upon in this written version.

Part 2

The Digital Humanities as Chiaroscuro (Rhody)

Taking as a point of departure your thoughtful inversion of the “bright” and “dark” sides of the digital humanities, I want to begin by revisiting the origin of those terms as they are born out of rhetoric surrounding the 2009 MLA Annual Convention, when academic and popular news outlets seemed first to recognize digital humanities scholarship and, in turn, to celebrate it against a dreary backdrop of economic recession and university restructuring. Most frequently, such language refers to William Pannapacker’s *Chronicle of Higher Education* blog post on December 28, 2009, in which he writes:

Amid all the doom and gloom of the 2009 MLA Convention, 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.

I think we are now realizing that resistance is futile. One convention attendee complained that this MLA seems more like a conference on technology than one on literature. I saw the complaint on Twitter. (“MLA”)

Of course, Pannapacker’s relationship to digital humanities has changed since his first post. In a later *Chronicle* blog entry regarding the 2012 MLA Annual Convention, Pannapacker walked back his earlier characterization of the digital humanities, explaining: “I regret that my claim about DH as the NBT—which I meant in a serious way—has become a basis for a rhetoric that presents it as some passing fad that most faculty members can dismiss or even block when DH’ers come up for tenure” (“Come-to-DH”). Unfortunately

for the public's perception of digital humanities, the provocativeness of Pannapacker's earlier rhetoric continues to receive much more attention than the retractions he has written since.

In 2009, though, Pannapacker was reacting to the "doom and gloom" with which a December 17 *New York Times* article set the stage for the MLA Annual Convention by citing dismal job prospects for PhD graduates. The *Times* article begins with a sobering statistic: "faculty positions will decline 37 percent, the biggest drop since the group began tracking its job listings 35 years ago" (Lewin). Pannapacker, though, wasn't the first one who called digital humanities a "bright spot." That person was Laura Mandell, in her post on the Armstrong Institute for Interactive Media Studies (AIMS) blog on January 13, 2010, just following the conference: "Digital Humanities made the news: these panels were considered to be the one bright spot amid 'the doom and gloom' of a fallen economy, a severely depressed job market, and the specter of university-restructuring that will inevitably limit the scope and sway of departments of English and other literatures and languages" ("Digital"). In neither her AIMS post nor in her MLA paper does Mandell support a "vapid embrace of the digital" or champion digital humanities as a *solution* to the sense of doom and gloom in the academy. Rather, in both, Mandell candidly and openly contends with one of the greatest challenges to digital humanities work: collaboration.

The "brightness" surrounding digital humanities at the 2009 MLA convention was based on the observation that DH and media studies panels drew such high attendance *because* they focused on long-standing, unresolved issues not just for digital humanities but for the study of literature and language at large. For example, in Mandell's session, "Links and Kinks in the Chain: Collaboration in the Digital Humanities"—a session presided over by Tanya Clement (University of Maryland, College Park) and that also included Jason B. Jones (Central Connecticut State University), Bethany Nowviskie (*Neatline*, University of Virginia), Timothy Powell (*Ojibwe Archives*, University of Pennsylvania), and Jason Rhody (National Endowment for the Humanities [NEH])—presenters addressed the challenges and cautious optimism that scholarly collaboration in the context of digital humanities projects requires.¹ Liz Losh's reflections on the panel recall a perceived consensus that collaboration is hard enough that one might be tempted to write it off as a fool's errand, as Nowviskie's tongue-in-cheek use of an image titled "The Ministry of Silly Walks" (borrowed from a Monty Python skit) implied. But neither Nowviskie's nor Mandell's point was to stop trying; quite the opposite, their message was that collaboration takes hard

work, patience, revisions to existing assumptions about academic status, and a willingness to compromise when the stakes feel high. As Mandell recalls in her post: “[M]y deep sense of it is that we came to some conclusions (provisional, of course). Digital Humanists, we decided, are concerned to protect the openness of collaboration and intellectual equality of participants in various projects while insuring the professional benefits for those contributors whose positions within academia are not equal (grad students, salaried employees, professors)” (“Digital”). That is a tall order, especially because digital humanities scholarship unsettles deeply rooted institutional beliefs about how humanists do research. If the digital humanities in 2009 seemed “bright,” it was in large part because it refocused collective attention around issues that vexed not just digital humanists but their inter-/ trans-/ multi-disciplinary peers, those Julia Flanders is noted for having called “hybrid scholars,” a term not limited to digital humanists. Furthermore, across the twenty-seven sessions at the conference that might be considered digital humanities or media studies related, most addressed, at least in a tangential way, issues related to working across institutional barriers.² In other words, the bright optimism of 2009 for *digital humanists* was not that of economic recovery, employment solutions, and technological determinism, but of consensus building and renewed attention to long-standing institutional barriers.

One takeaway from the 2009 MLA panels is also a collective sense of strangeness in claiming “digital humanities” as a name when it draws together such a diversity of humanities scholars with so many different research agendas under a common title—an unease that, perhaps, may be attributed to the chosen theme of the Digital Humanities 2011 conference, “Big Tent Digital Humanities.” What the four years since the “Links and Kinks” panel have proven is that its participants were right: collaboration, digital scholarship, and intellectual equality are really hard, and no, we haven’t come up with solutions to those challenges yet.

Reorienting the bright side/dark side debate away from the provocativeness of its media hype and back toward the spirit of creating consensus around long-standing humanities concerns, I would like to suggest that the “dark side” of digital humanities is that we are *still* struggling with issues that we began calling attention to even earlier than 2009: effectively collaborating within and between disciplines, institutions, and national boundaries; reorienting a deeply entrenched academic class structure; recovering archival silences; and building a freer, more open scholarly discourse. Consequently, a distorted narrative that touts digital humanities as

a “bright hope” for overcoming institutional, social, cultural, and economic challenges has actually made it harder for digital humanities to continue acting as a galvanizing force among hybrid scholar peers and to keep the focus on shared interests because such rhetoric falsely positions digital humanities and the “rest” of humanities as if they’re in opposition to one another.

DH and Technological Determinism

Moving beyond the “bright/dark” dichotomy is in part complicated by the popular complaint first levied against digital humanities at the 2009 MLA conference that “resistance is futile” and that the convention seemed to be more about technology than literature (see Pannapacker, “MLA,” above). Setting aside the problematic opposition between “technology” and “literature” that Pannapacker’s unnamed source makes, the early euphoria over digital humanities that you call attention to in your talk is frequently linked to a sense that digital humanists have fallen victim to a pervasive technological determinism. The rhetoric of technological determinism, however, more often comes from those who consciously position themselves as digital humanities skeptics—which is in stark contrast to how early adopters in the humanities approached technology.

In 1998, early technology adopters like Dan Cohen, Neil Frai-stat, Alan Liu, Allen Renear, Roy Rosenzweig, Susan Schreibman, Martha Nell Smith, John Unsworth, and others didn’t encourage students to learn HTML (HyperText Markup Language), SGML (Standard Generalized Markup Language), or TEI (Text Encoding Initiative) so they could get jobs. They did it, in large part, so students could understand the precarious opportunity that the World Wide Web afforded scholarly production and communication. Open, shared standards could ensure a freer exchange of ideas than proprietary standards, and students developed webpages to meet multiple browser specifications so that they could more fully appreciate how delicate, how rewarding, and how uncertain publishing on the Web could be in an environment where Netscape and Microsoft Internet Explorer sought to corner the market on Web browsing.³ Reading lists and bibliographies in those early courses drew heavily from the textual studies scholarship of other early adopters such as Johanna Drucker, Jerome McGann, Morris Eaves, and Joseph Viscomi, whose work had likewise long considered the material economies of knowledge production in both print and digital media.

Consider the cautious optimism that characterizes Roy Rosenzweig and Dan Cohen's 2005 *Introduction to Digital History*, which begins with a chapter titled "Promises and Perils of Digital History":

We obviously believe that we gain something from doing digital history, making use of the new computer-based technologies. Yet although we are wary of the conclusions of techno-skeptics, we are not entirely enthusiastic about the views of the cyber-enthusiasts either. Rather, we believe that we need to critically and soberly assess where computer networks and digital media are and aren't useful for historians—a category that we define broadly to include amateur enthusiasts, research scholars, museum curators, documentary filmmakers, historical society administrators, classroom teachers, and history students at all levels [. . .]. Doing digital history well entails being aware of technology's advantages and disadvantages, and how to maximize the former while minimizing the latter. (18)

In other words, digital history, and by extension digital humanities, grew out of a thoughtful and reflective awareness of technology's potential, as well as its dangers, and not a "vapid embrace of the digital." Moreover, the earliest convergence between scholars of disparate humanities backgrounds coalesced most effectively and openly in resistance to naive technological determinism.

Anxiety, however, creeps into conversations about digital humanities with phrases like "soon it won't be the digital humanities [. . .] it will just be the humanities." Used often enough that citing every occasion would be impossible, such a phrase demonstrates and fuels a fear that methods attributed to digital humanities will soon be the *only* viable methods in the field, and that's simply not true. And yet, unless there is a core contingent of faculty who continue to distribute their work in typed manuscripts and consult print indexes of periodicals that I don't know about, everyone is already a digital humanist insofar as it is a condition of contemporary research that we must ask questions about the values, technologies, and economies that organize and redistribute scholarly communication—and that is and always has been a fundamental concern within the field of digital humanities since before it adopted that moniker and was called merely "humanities computing."⁴

DH and moocs

Related to concerns over technological determinism is an indictment that digital humanities has given way to a “vapid embrace of the digital” as exemplified by universities’ recent love affair with moocs. You describe the moocification of higher education very well as the desire to “rewrit[e] political and pedagogical problems into technological ones, into problems that technology can fix. This rewriting ranges from the idea that moocs, rather than a serious public commitment to education, can solve the problem of the spiraling cost of education [. . .] to the blind embrace of technological skills.” Digital humanists who have dared to tread on this issue most often do so with highly qualified claims that higher education, too, requires change. For example, Edward Ayers’s article in the *Chronicle*, “A More-Radical Online Revolution,” contends that if an effective online course is possible, it is only so when the course reorients its relationship to what knowledge production and learning really are. He points out that technology won’t solve the problem, but learning to teach better with technology might help. Those two arguments are not the same. The latter acknowledges that we have to make fundamental changes in the way we approach learning in higher education—changes that most institutions celebrating and embracing moocs are unwilling to commit to by investing in human labor. In solidarity with Ayers’s cautious optimism are those like Cathy Davidson, who has often made the point that moocs are popular with university administrators because they are *the least* disruptive to education models that find their roots in the industrial revolution—and conversely this is why most digital humanists oppose them.

DH and Funding

Another challenge presented by the specter of media attention to the field of digital humanities has been the perception that it draws on large sums of money otherwise inaccessible to the rest of humanities researchers. Encapsulating the “cruel optimism” you identify as described by Lauren Berlant, hopeful academic administrations may once have seen digital humanities research as having access to seemingly limitless pools of money—an assumption that creates department and college resentments.

But there’s a reality check that needs to happen, both on the part of hopeful administrations and on the part of frustrated scholars: funding overall is scarce. Period. Humanists are not in competition with digital

humanists for funding: humanists are in competition with *everyone* for more funding. For example, since 2010, the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) budget has been reduced by 17 percent. In its *Appropriations Request for Fiscal Year 2014*, the NEH lists the 2012 Office of Digital Humanities (ODH) actual budget at \$4,143,000. In other words, ODH—the NEH division charged with funding digital research in the humanities—controls the smallest budget of any other division in the agency by a margin of \$9 to 10 million (*National Endowment* 13; see table 1 at the end of this article).

Since most grants from ODH are institutional grants as opposed to individual grants (such as fellowships or summer stipends), a substantive portion of each ODH award is absorbed by the sponsoring institution in order to offset “indirect costs.” When digital humanities centers and their institutions send out celebratory announcements about how they just received a grant for a digital humanities project for x number of dollars, only a fraction of that money actually goes to directly support the project in question. Anywhere between 25 to 55 percent of digital humanities grant funds are absorbed by the institution to “offset” what are also referred to as facilities and administrative—F&A—costs, or overhead. Indirect cost rates are usually negotiated once each year between the individual academic institutions and a larger federal agency (think Department of Defense, Environmental Protection Agency, National Institutes of Health, National Aeronautics and Space Administration, or Department of the Navy), and they are presumably used to support lab environments for STEM-related disciplines (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics). Whatever the negotiated cost rate at each institution, that same rate is then applied to all other grant recipients from the same institution who receive federal funds regardless of discipline. While specialized maintenance personnel, clean rooms, security, and hazard insurance might be necessary to offset costs to the institution to support a STEM-related research project, it is unclear the extent to which digital humanities projects benefit from these funds. Thus, while institutions are excited to promote, publicize, and even support digital humanities grant applications (bright side), that publicity simultaneously casts long shadows obscuring from public view the reality that the actual dollar amount that goes directly to support DH projects is significantly reduced.

If we really wanted to get serious about exploring the shadows of digital humanities research, we might begin by asking probative questions about where those indirect costs go and how they are used. In fact, as Christopher Newfield points out in “Ending the Budget Wars: Funding the Humanities during a Crisis in Higher Education,” more of us humanists

should be engaging in a healthy scrutiny of our institution's budgets. Newfield points out that academic administrations have been milking humanities departments for quite a long time without clear indication of where income from humanities general education courses actually go:

First we must understand that though the humanities in general and literary studies in particular are poor and struggling, we are not naturally poor and struggling. We are not on a permanent austerity budget because we don't have the intrinsic earning power of the science and engineering fields and aren't fit enough to survive in the modern university. I suggest, on the basis of a case study, that the humanities fields are poor and struggling because they are being milked like cash cows by their university administrations. The money that departments generate through teaching enrollments that the humanists do not spend on their almost completely unfunded research is routinely skimmed and sent elsewhere in the university. As the current university funding model continues to unravel, the humanities' survival as national fields will depend on changing it. (271)

Lack of clarity about where money absorbed by academic institutions as indirect costs ends up is linked to a much wider concern about whether or not humanities departments really *should* be as poor and struggling as they are. Here is an opportunity in which we could use the so-called celebrity status of digital humanities to cast new light on the accounting, budgeting, and administering of humanities colleges in general to the benefit of faculty and researchers regardless of their research methods.

DH and Collaboration

The topic of money, however, returns us to the complicated constellation of issues that accompany collaboration. Barriers to collaboration, as Mandell, Nowviskie, Powell, Jones, and Rhody discussed in 2009, are less a matter of fear or bias against collaborating with the sciences or engineering than they might have been in the past. As it turns out, though, collaboration across institutional boundaries is hard because financing it is surprisingly complex and often insufficient. In 2009, the *Digging into Data Challenge* announced its first slate of awardees. Combining the funds and efforts of four granting agencies (JISC [Joint Information Systems Committee], NEH, NSF [National Science Foundation], and SSHRC [Social Sciences

and Humanities Research Council]), *Digging into Data* grants focused on culling resources, emphasizing collaboration, and privileging interdisciplinary research efforts—all valuable and laudable goals. In a follow-up report (unfortunately named) *One Culture: Computationally Intensive Research in the Humanities and Social Sciences: A Report on the Experiences of First Respondents to the Digging into Data Challenge*, however, participants identify four significant challenges to their work: funding, time, communication, and data (Williford and Henry). In other words, just about everything it takes to collaborate presents challenges.

The question is, though, what have we been able to do to change this? How well have we articulated these issues to those who don't call themselves digital humanists in ways that make us come together to advocate for better funding for *all* kinds of humanities research, rather than constantly competing with one another to grab a bigger piece of a disappearing pie? The frustrating part in all of this is that we *know* collaboration is hard. We *want* to bridge communities within the humanities, across to social science and STEM disciplines, and even across international, cultural, and economic divides. Unless we really set to work on deeper issues like revising budgets, asking pointed questions about indirect cost rates, and figuring out how to communicate across disciplines, share data, and organize our collective time, four years from now we will still be asking the same questions.

DH and Labor

Finally, there are other “shadows” in the academy where digital humanists have been hard at work. While no one in the digital humanities really believes that technical skills alone will prepare anyone for a job, important work by digital humanists has helped reshape the discourse around labor and employment in academia. For example, Tanya Clement and Dave Lester's NEH-funded white paper “Off the Tracks: Laying New Lines for Digital Humanities Scholars” brought together digital humanities practitioners to consider career trajectories for humanities PhDs employed to do academic work in nontenure, often contingent university positions. For example, groups such as *DH Commons*, an initiative supported by a coalition of digital humanities centers called centerNet, put those interested in technology and the humanities in contact with other digital humanities practitioners through shared interests and needs. “Alt-Academy,” a *MediaCommons* project, invites, publishes, and fosters dialogue about the opportunities and risks of working in academic posts other than traditional tenure-track jobs.

While none of these projects could be credited with “finding jobs” for PhDs, per se, they are demonstrations of the ways digital humanities practitioners have made academic labor a central issue to the field.

Worth noting: all of these projects have come to fruition since 2009 and in response to concerns about labor issues, recognition, and credit in a stratified academic class structure. And yet, none of these approaches on their own are solutions. There are still more people in digital humanities who are in contingent, nontenure-track positions than there are in tenure-track posts. A heavy reliance on soft funding continues to fuel an academic class structure in which divisions persist between tenure-track and contract faculty and staff—divisions that seem to be reinscribed along lines of gender and race difference. As long as these divisions of labor remain unsatisfactorily addressed, it promises to dim the light of a field that espouses the value of “intellectual equality” (Mandell). Even though recent efforts by the Scholarly Communication Institute (SCI) (an Andrew W. Mellon Foundation-supported initiative) have not answered long-standing questions of contingent academic labor and placement of recent PhDs in the humanities, efforts to survey current alternative academic (alt-ac) professionals and to build a network of digital humanities graduate programs through the Praxis Network constitute important steps toward addressing these widely acknowledged problems across a spectrum of humanities disciplines. As a field, digital humanities has not promised direct avenues to tenure-track jobs or even alt-ac ones; however, digital humanities is a community of practice that, born out of an era of decreasing tenure-track job openings and rhetoric about the humanities in crisis, has worked publicly to raise awareness and improve dialogue that identifies, recognizes, and rewards intellectual work by scholars operating outside traditional tenure-track placements.

DH Silences and Shadows

I agree that what is truly bright about the digital humanities is that it has drawn from passion in its critical, creative, and innovative approaches to persistent humanities questions. For example, I look at the work of Lauren Klein, whose 2012 MLA paper was one of four that addressed the archival silences caused by slavery. Klein’s paper responded directly to Alan Liu’s call to “reinscribe cultural criticism at the center of digital humanities work” (“Where Is?”). Her computational methods explore the silent presence of James Hemings in the archived letters of Thomas Jefferson:

To be quite certain, the ghost of James Hemings means enough. But what we can do is examine the contours that his shadow casts on the Jefferson archive, and ask ourselves what is illuminated and what remains concealed. In the case of the life—and death—of James Hemings, even as we consider the information disclosed to us through Jefferson’s correspondence, and the conversations they record—we realize just how little about the life of James Hemings we will ever truly know. (“Report”)

Klein proposes one possible way in which we might integrate race, gender, and postcolonial theory with computer learning to develop methodologies for performing research in bias-laden archives, whereby we can expose and address absences.

Still, while we have become more adept at engaging critical theory and computation in our scholarship, we have spent little of that effort constructing an inclusive, multivalent, diverse, and self-conscious archive of our own field as it has grown and changed. The shadows and variegated terrain of the digital humanities, this odd collection of “hybrid scholars,” is much more complicated, as one might expect, than the bright/dark binary by which it is too often characterized. Recovering the histories of DH has proven complicated. Jacqueline Wernimont made this point famously well in a paper she delivered at DH2013 and in a forthcoming article in *Digital Humanities Quarterly* (DHQ). Wernimont explains that characterizing any particular project as feminist is difficult to do: “The challenges arise not from a lack of feminist engagement in digital humanities work, quite the opposite is true, but rather in the difficulty tracing political, ideological, and theoretical commitments in work that involves so many layers of production.” Put simply: the systems and networks from which DH projects arise are wickedly complex. Perhaps a bit more contentiously: the complexity of those networks has enabled narratives of digital humanities to evolve that elide feminist work that has been foundational to the field.

Wernimont’s claim runs contrary to the impulse to address through provocation the sobering challenges that confront the digital humanities. Rather than claiming that “no feminist work has been done in DH,” Wernimont engages productively with the multifaceted work conditions that have led to our understanding of the field.

As you suggest at the tail end of your talk, we often claim to “celebrate failures,” but it is unclear to what extent we follow through on that intent. Despite John Unsworth’s 1997 insistence in “Documenting the

Reinvention of Text: The Importance of Failure” that we make embracing failure a disciplinary value, we very rarely do it. Consequently, we have riddled our discipline’s own archive with silences about our work process, our labor practices, our funding models, our collaborative challenges, and even our critical theory. As a result, we have allowed the false light of a thriving field alive with job opportunities, research successes, and technological determinism to seep into those holes. In other words, we have not done what we as humanists should know better than to do: we have not told our own story faithfully.

Even so, recent events have demonstrated important steps to improving transparency in digital humanities. This summer at the DH2013 conference, Quinn Dombrowski did what few scholars are willing or bold enough to do. She exposed a project’s failure in a talk titled, “Whatever Happened to Project Bamboo?” Dombrowski recounted the challenges faced by an Andrew W. Mellon-funded cyberinfrastructure project between 2008 and 2012. Tellingly, when you go to the project’s website, there is no discussion of what happened to it—whether or not it met its goals, or why, or even what institutions participated in it. There is a “documentation wiki” where visitors might review the archived project files, an “issue tracker,” and a “code repository.” There is even a link to the “archive” copy of the website as it existed during its funding cycle. That is it. In the face of this silence, Dombrowski provided a voice for what might be seen as the project’s failure to begin hashing through the difficulties of collaboration and the dangers of assuming what humanists want before asking them.

Dombrowski’s paper was welcomed by the community and celebrated as a necessary contribution to our scholarly communication practices. Significantly, many DH projects, particularly those that receive federal funding, do have outlets for discussing their processes, management, and decisions; however, where these scholarly and reflective documents are published is often in places where those starting out in digital humanities are unlikely to find them. White papers, grant narratives, and project histories—informally published scholarship called gray literature—discuss significant aspects of digital humanities research, such as rationales for staffing decisions, technology choices, and even the critical theories that are foundational to a project’s development. Still, gray literature is often stored or published on funders’ websites or in institutional repositories. Occasionally, though less frequently, white papers may be published on a project’s website. Since these publications reside outside a humanist’s usual research purview, they are less likely to be found or used by scholars new

to the field. In her essay “Let the Grant Do the Talking,” Sheila Brennan suggests that wider circulation of these materials would prove an important contribution to scholarship: “One way to present digital humanities work could be to let grant proposals and related reports or white papers do some of the talking for us, because those forms of writing already provide intellectual rationales behind digital projects and illustrate the theory in practice.” Brennan continues by explaining that grant proposals are often heavily scrutinized by peer reviewers and provide detailed surveys of existing resources. Most federal funders require white papers that reflect upon the nature of the work performed during the grant when the grant period is over, all of which are made available to the public. While the nature of the writing differs from what one might find in a typical journal article, grant proposals and white papers address general humanities audiences. That means a body of scholarly writing already exists that addresses the history, composition, and development of a sizeable portion of digital humanities work. The challenge resides in making this writing more visible to a broader humanities audience.

Although we still have work to do to continue filling in the archival silences of digital humanities, I believe that it is a project worth the work involved. Eschewing the impulse to draw stark contrasts between digital humanities and the rest of the humanities, choosing instead to delve into the complex social, economic, and institutional pressures that a “technological euphoria” obscures represents a promising way ahead for humanists—digital and otherwise.

Part 3

Shadows in the Archive (Chun)

First, thank you for an excellent and insightful response, for the ways you historicize the “bright side” rhetoric, take on the challenges of funding, and elaborate on what you find to be DH’s dark side: your points about the silences about DH’s work process, its labor practices, funding models, collaborative challenges, and critical theory are all profound. Further, your move from bright/dark to shadows is inspiring.

By elaborating on the work done by early adopters and younger scholars, you show how digital humanists do not engage in a “vapid embrace of the digital.” You show that the technological determinists rather than the practicing digital humanists are the detractors (and I would also insert here supporters). Indeed, if any group would know the ways in which the digital

humanities do not guarantee everything they are hyped to do, it is those who have for many years worked under the rubric of “humanities computing.” As Liu has so pointedly argued, they have been viewed for years as servants rather than masters (“Where Is”). They know intimately the precariousness of soft money projects, the difficulty of being granted tenure for preparing rather than interpreting texts, and the ways in which teaching students mark-up languages hardly guarantees them jobs. For all these reasons, the “bright side” rhetoric is truly baffling—unless, of course, one considers the institutional framework within which the digital humanities has been embraced. As you point out, it has not given institutions the access to the limitless pools of money they once hoped for, but it has given them access to indirect cost recovery—something that very few humanities projects provide.⁵ It also gives them a link to the future. As William Gibson, who coined the term “cyberspace” before he had ever used a computer, once quipped, “[T]he future is already here—it’s just not evenly distributed.”

The cruel optimism I describe is thus a “vapid embrace of the digital” writ large, rather than simply an embrace of the digital humanities. One need only think back to the mid-1990s when the Internet became a mass medium after its backbone was sold to private corporations and to the rhetoric that surrounded it as the solution to all our problems, from racial discrimination to inequalities in the capitalist marketplace, from government oversight to the barriers of physical location. And as you note, this embrace is most pointed among those on the outside: soon after most Americans were on the Internet, the television commercials declaring the Internet the great equalizer disappeared. Stanley Fish’s “The Old Order Changeth” compares DH to theory, stating, “[O]nce again, as in the early theory days, a new language is confidently and prophetically spoken by those in the know, while those who are not are made to feel ignorant, passed by, left behind, old.”

Yet, your discussion of what you see as the dark side—that, because of DHers’ silences, “[W]e have allowed the false light of a thriving field alive with job opportunities, research successes, and technological determinism to seep into those holes”—made me revisit Berlant again and in particular her insistence that cruel optimism is doubly cruel because it allows us to be “bound to a situation of profound threat that is, at the same time, profoundly confirming” (2). It is the confirmation—the modes of survival—that generate pleasure and make cruel optimism so cruel. Also, as Berlant emphasizes, optimism is not stupid or simple, for “often the risk of attachment taken in its throes manifests an intelligence beyond rational

calculation” (2). Given the institutional structures under which we work, I find your call for DHers to tell their own story faithfully to be incredibly important and, I think also, incredibly difficult.

Rather than focus on DH, though, I want to return to the broadness of my initial analysis and your response. I was serious when I stated that my comments were not directed toward DH per se, but rather toward the technological euphoria surrounding the digital, a euphoria that makes political problems into ones that technology can solve. Here, I think the problem we face is not the “crisis in the humanities” or the divide between humanists and digital humanists, but rather the defunding of universities, a defunding to which universities have responded badly. I remember a former administrator at Brown once saying: “[W]e are in the business of two things: teaching and research. Both lose money.” His point was that viewing research simply as a way to generate revenue (“indirect costs”) overlooks the costs of doing “big” research; his point was also that the university was in the business not of making money, but of educating folk. Grasping for ever-diminishing sums of grant money to keep universities going—a grasping that also entails a vast expenditure in start-up funds, costs for facilities, and so on, arguably available to only a small number of already elite universities—is a way to tread water for a while but is unsustainable.

We see the unsustainability of this clearly in the recent euphoria around moocs, which are not, as you point out, embraced by the DH community even as they are increasingly defining DH in the minds of many. They are sexy in a way that Zotero is not and Bamboo was not. moocs are attractive for many reasons, not least in terms of their promise (and I want to stress here that it is only a promise—and that promises and threats, as Derrida has argued, have the same structure) to alleviate the costs of getting a college degree. But why and how have we gotten here? And would students such as my younger self, educated in Canada in the 1980s, have found moocs so attractive? As I stressed at the MLA, the problem is debt: the level of student debt is unsustainable, as are the ways universities are approaching the problem of debt by acquiring more of it (a problem, I realize, that affects most institutions and businesses in the era of neoliberalism). The problem is also the strained relationship between education and employment. To repeat a few paragraphs from that talk:

The humanities are sinking—if they are—not because of their earlier embrace of theory or multiculturalism, but because they have capitulated to a bureaucratic technocratic logic. *They have*

*conceded to a logic, an enframing (*to use Heidegger's term*), that has made publishing a question of quantity rather than quality, so that we spew forth MPUs or minimum publishable units; a logic, an enframing, that can make teaching a burden rather than a mission, so that professors and students are increasingly at odds; a logic, an enframing, that has divided the profession and made us our own worst enemies, so that those who have jobs for life deny jobs to others—others who have often accomplished more than they (than we)—have.*

The academy is a sinking ship—if it is—because it sinks our students into debt, and this debt, generated by this optimistic belief that a university degree automatically guarantees a job, is what both sustains and kills us. *This residual belief/hope stems from another time, when most of us couldn't go to university; another time, when young adults with degrees received good jobs not necessarily because of what they learned, but because of the society in which they lived.*

We—and I mean this “we” broadly—have not been good at explaining the difference between being educated and getting a job. A college degree does not guarantee a job; if it did in the past, it was because of demographics and discrimination (in the broadest sense of the term). One thing we can do is to explain to students this difference and to tell them that they need to put the same effort into getting a job that they did into getting into college. To help them, we have not only to alert them to internships and job fairs but also to encourage them to take risks, to expand the courses they take in university and to view challenging courses as rewarding. I cannot emphasize how much I learned—even unintentionally—from doing both systems design engineering and English literature as an undergraduate: combined, they opened up new paths of thinking and analyzing with which I'm still grappling. Another thing we can do is address, as you so rightly underscore, how the university spends money.

Most importantly, we need to take on detractors of higher education not by conceding to the rhetoric of “employability,” but arguing that the good (rather than goods) of the university comes from what lies outside of immediate applicability: basic research that no industrial research center would engage in, the cultivation of critical practices and thinking that make us better users and producers of digital technologies and better citizens. I want to emphasize that this entails building a broad coalition

across all disciplines within the university. The sciences can not only be as useless as the humanities, they can also be as invested in remaining silent and bathing in the false glow of employability and success as some in the DH. As I mentioned in the MLA talk, there are students who graduate from the sciences and cannot find jobs; the sciences are creative and critical; the sciences, of all the disciplines, are most threatened by moocs. We need to build coalitions, rather than let some disciplines be portrayed as “in crisis,” so that ours, we hope, can remain unscathed. To live by the rhetoric of usefulness and practicality—of technological efficiency—is also to die by it. Think of the endlessness of debates around global climate change, debates that are so endless in part because the probabilistic nature of science can never match its sure rhetoric.

What I also want to emphasize is that these coalitions will be fractious. There will be no consensus, but, inspired by the work of Anna Tsing, I see friction as grounding, not detracting from, political action. These coalitions are also necessary to take on challenges facing the world today, such as the rise of big data. Again, not because they are inherently practical, but rather, because they can take on the large questions raised by it, such as: given that almost any correlation can be found, what is the relationship between correlation and causality? between what’s empirically observable and what’s true?

I want to end by thinking again of Berlant’s call for “ambient citizenship” as a response to cruel optimism and Lauren Klein’s really brilliant work, which you cite and which I—along with my coeditors Tara McPherson and Patrick Jagoda—am honored to publish as part of a special issue of *American Literature* on new media and American literature (“Image”). Berlant ends *Cruel Optimism* by asking to what extent attending to ambient noise could create forms of affective attachment that can displace those that are cruelly optimistic. These small gestures would attend to noises and daily gestures that surround us rather than to dramatic gestures that too quickly become the site of new promises (although she does acknowledge that ambient citizenship resonates disturbingly with George W. Bush’s desire to “get rid of the filter”). Ambient citizenship would mean attending to things like teaching: teaching, which is often accomplished not by simply relaying information (this is the mooc model), but through careful attention to the noises in and dynamics of the classroom. I also wonder how this notion of ambient citizenship can be linked to Klein’s remarkable work discovering the contours of James Heming in the letters of Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson, as Klein notes, was meticulous about documentation and was very much

aware of leaving an archive for history. Searching for “information” about Heming, his former slave and chef, though, is extremely difficult, and reducing the lives of slaves to lists and accounts—to the signals that remain—is unethical. Drawing from the work of Saidiya Hartmann and Stephen Best, Klein uses DH tools to trace the ghost, the lingering presence, of Heming. She uses these tools to draw out the complexity of relations between individuals across social groups. Resisting the logic of and ethic of recovery, she makes the unrecorded story of Hemings “expand with meaning and motion.” She also, even as she uses these tools, critiques visualization as “the answer,” linking the logic of visualization to Jefferson’s uses of it to justify slavery.

Klein’s work epitomizes how DH can be used to grapple with the impossible, rather than simply usher in the possible. I think that her work—and some other work in DH—by refusing the light and the dark, reveals the ways in which the work done by the union of the digital and the humanities (a union that is not new, but rich in history) will not be in the clearing (to refer to Heidegger), but rather, as you suggest, in the shadows.

Table 1
FY 2014 Appropriation Request (\$ in thousands).

NEH.gov

	FY 2012	FY 2013	FY 2014
	<u>Approp.</u>	<u>Estimate</u>	<u>Request</u>
<i>Bridging Cultures</i>	\$3,494	\$3,515	\$9,000
Education Programs	13,179	13,260	13,250
Federal/State Partnership	40,435	40,683	43,432
Preservation and Access	15,176	15,269	15,750
Public Programs	13,404	13,486	14,000
Research Programs	14,502	14,591	15,435
Digital Humanities	4,143	4,168	4,450
We the People	2,995	3,013	—
<u>Program Development</u>	<u>499</u>	<u>502</u>	<u>500</u>
Subtotal	107,827	108,487	115,817
Challenge Grants	8,537	8,408	8,850
<u>Treasury Funds</u>	<u>2,381</u>	<u>2,396</u>	<u>2,400</u>
Subtotal	10,738	10,804	11,250
<u>Administration</u>	<u>27,456</u>	<u>27,624</u>	<u>27,398</u>
Total	\$146,021	\$146,915*	\$154,465

*This column reflects FY 2013 annualized funding, including a 0.612% increase as provided by the FY 2013 Continuing Appropriations Resolution, P.L. 112-175.

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Notes

- 1

See “Links and Kinks in the Chain: Collaboration in the Digital Humanities” for an abstract of the 2009 MLA Convention panel.
- 2

For a list of the twenty-seven digital humanities and media studies sessions presented at the 2009 MLA Convention, see Sample.
- 3

At the time, much media attention was devoted to the *United States v. Microsoft Corporation* antitrust case initiated in 1998 and settled by the United States Department of Justice in 2001, which created a backdrop for ensuing conversations about open standards in humanities computing.
- 4

See John Unsworth’s talk, “What Is Humanities Computing and What Is Not?” for more along these lines.
- 5

Indirect cost recovery started during World War II and the era of Big Science: the government agreed to pay for the physical infrastructure needed for funded projects; private grant agencies—still a large source of funding for the humanities, often in the form of fellowships—routinely refuse to pay for these offsets.

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