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Debates in the Digital Humanities

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The Turtlenecked Hairshirt

IAN BOGOST

In a reflection on all the recent hubbub about the sordid state of the humanities and the recently proposed possibility of a cure in the form of the digital humanities, Cathy Davidson offers the following lament:

When I think of what the humanities offer . . . it is astonishing to me (and tragic) that we are not central. We are very, very good at blaming others for our marginalization. I truly believe that most universities would be entirely grateful for a visionary humanities program that addressed the critical needs of literacies for the twenty-first century. That would not have to be all we need to do, but why we aren't making that our mission, staking that as our invaluable inestimable value in a radically changing world, is beyond my comprehension.¹

The only possible answer is that it's us.

The problem is not the humanities as a discipline. (Who can blame a discipline?) The problem is its members. We are insufferable. We do not want change. We do not want centrality. We do not want to speak to nor interact with the world. We mistake the tiny pastures of private ideals with the megalopolis of real lives. We spin from our mouths retrograde dreams of the second coming of the nineteenth century while simultaneously dismissing out of our sphincters the far more earnest ambitions of the public at large—religion, economy, family, craft, science.

Humanists work hard but at all the wrong things, the commonest of which is the fetid fester of a hypothetical socialist dream world, one that has become far more disconnected with labor and material than the neoliberalism it claims to replace.

Humanism does not deserve to carry the standard for humans, for frankly it despises them.

We don't make reform our mission because we secretly hate the idea of partaking of and in the greater world, even as we purport to give it voice, to speak of its ills through critical esoterics no public ear could ever grasp. Instead we colonize that world—all in the name of liberation, of course—in order to return its spoils

to our fetid den of Lacanian self-denial. We masticate on culture for the pleasure of praising our own steaming shit.

We are not central because we have chosen to be marginal, for to be central would be to violate the necessity of marginality. We practice the monastic worship of a secular God we divined in order to kill again, mistaking ourselves for the madmen of our fantasies. We are masochists in hedonists' clothing. We are tweed demolitionists.

If there is one reason things "digital" might release humanism from its turtle-necked hairshirt it is precisely because computing has revealed a world full of things: hairdressers, recipes, pornographers, typefaces, Bible studies, scandals, magnetic disks, rugby players, dereferenced pointers, cardboard void fill, pro-lifers, snowstorms. The digital world is replete. It resists any efforts to be colonized by the post-colonialists. We cannot escape it by holing up in Berkeley waiting for the taurus of time to roll around to 1968. It will find us and it will videotape our kittens.

It's not the digital that marks the future of the humanities—it's what things digital point to: a great outdoors.² A real world. A world of humans, things, and ideas. A world of the commonplace. A world that prepares jello salads. A world that litigates, that chews gum, that mixes cement. A world that rusts, that photosynthesizes, that ebbs. The philosophy of tomorrow should not be digital democracy but a democracy of objects.³

If we want the humanities to become central, it is not the humanities that must change but its members. We must want to be of the world, rather than hidden from it. We must be brutal. We must invoke wrath instead of liberation. We must cull. We must burn away the dead wood to let new growth flourish. If we don't, we will suffocate under the noxious rot of our own decay.

NOTES

This chapter originally appeared as "The Turtlenecked Hairshirt: Fetid and Fragrant Futures for the Humanities" (http://www.bogost.com/blog/the_turtlenecked_hairshirt.shtml).

1. <http://www.hastac.org/blogs/cathy-davidson/future-humanities>.

2. Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (London: Continuum, 2010), 7, 29, 50.

3. Levi Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Open Humanities, 2011).