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Criticality, Experimentation and Complicity in the *LA Review of Books*' Digital Humanities controversy

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In order to understand the way in which criticality appears as a concept, it is instructive to look at its deployment in policing the boundaries of disciplines. Here I examine a controversy that began in mid-2016, in which the boundary of the humanities (as a general disciplinary grouping of research activity) in general was drawn against Digital Humanities as a subdiscipline, on the grounds of its complicity in the neoliberal economics of the university and the alleged failure of its function as a 'critical' discipline.

The Digital Humanities controversy started with an article by Daniel Allington, Sarah Brouillette and David Golumbia in the *LA Review of Books* in May 2016.¹ The authors set out a polemic which strongly critiqued the place of Digital Humanities in academia. While the polemic is instructive, and in some respects serves to caution against enthusiastic alignment with market forces in the university, it is the nature of the response to their polemic (from both supporters and opponents of their argument) that I focus on here. That response is particularly interesting in helping us to understand how the idea of criticality is shaped in the interests of an assemblage of interrelated concepts: disciplinarity, morality and complicity. The authors make three key charges against Digital Humanities.

Firstly, they call it the exemplary neoliberal discipline, in that it accelerates tendencies towards neoliberal working conditions already present in the academy: insecure, project-based and 'alt-academic' work presented as the product of empowering career choices, and the redefinition of technical expertise as 'the superior form' of humanist

¹ Daniel Allington, Sarah Brouillette and David Golumbia, 'Neoliberal Tools (And Archives): A Political History of Digital Humanities', *LA Review of Books*, May 1, 2016, accessed June 14, 2016, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/neoliberal-tools-archives-political-history-digital-humanities/>,

knowledge.² The discipline also allows these tendencies to be extended into spaces of the academy that were previously immune to it, namely the bastions of ‘individual scholarship’ in the humanities.

Secondly, they argue that from its inception as a subdiscipline of textual studies, Digital Humanities has always been part of a general movement opposed to interpretation. They say:

Digital Humanities has often tended to be anti-interpretive, especially when interpretation is understood as a political activity. Digital Humanities instead aims to archive materials, produce data, and develop software, while bracketing off the work of interpretation to a later moment or leaving it to other scholars – or abandoning it altogether for those who argue that we ought to become ‘postcritical’.³

And as a corollary to that, Digital Humanities tends to bracket off questions of identity and politics more generally. ‘What it stands in opposition to, rather, is *the insistence that academic work should be critical*, and that there is, after all, no work and no way to be in the world that is not political.’⁴

Given these failures, the authors finally argue that in the Digital Humanities ‘[p]urported technical expertise trumps all other forms of knowledge’.⁵ Even where the impulse exists to do better – which for the authors can only mean to avoid reproducing the neoliberal university – the lure of funding and the pressure from managers will force researchers to push on and those neoliberal conditions are reached anyway.

At the end of the article the authors stop short of calling for disengagement, but they conclude that the success of the discipline is entirely premised on its complicity with a neoliberal agenda: ‘a consequence of its constitution, from the outset, as precisely such a recapitulation’ to the values of Silicon Valley startup culture.⁶ If its premises are accepted, the critique has to be taken as damning the

² Allington, Brouillette and Golumbia, ‘Neoliberal Tools (And Archives)’.

³ Allington, Brouillette and Golumbia, ‘Neoliberal Tools (And Archives)’.

⁴ Allington, Brouillette and Golumbia, ‘Neoliberal Tools (And Archives)’. Emphasis in original.

⁵ Allington, Brouillette and Golumbia, ‘Neoliberal Tools (And Archives)’.

⁶ Allington, Brouillette and Golumbia, ‘Neoliberal Tools (And Archives)’.

Digital Humanities to the scrapheap. Given the three charges (being the acceleration of neoliberalisation of the institution, the bracketing of the interpretive and the political, and especially that Digital Humanities by its very nature wills the neoliberalisation of the academy through the primacy of the technical), it seems difficult to come to any kind of compromise. By implication, this polemic is a call for a moral stance against Digital Humanities by any academic who wishes to call themselves ‘critical’.

I don’t want to attempt an answer to the question of whether Allington, Brouillette and Golumbia are right in implicitly calling for such a stance. Since the initial controversy in 2016, a large number of respondents have taken them to task for saying so; for example, Brian Greenspan sensitively addresses the “*ressentiment*” implicit in the article while recognising the important role that digital humanities serves in “scandalously reveal[ing] the system’s components.”⁷ I don’t think that such a call (to disengage from the types of research included in the Digital Humanities, or conversely to endorse them) would make sense in light of my earlier question: under what conditions can we call thought ‘critical’, and what does the defining of thought as critical actually do?

Broadly, there have been two types of response to the polemic. The first is those that only engage with the idea of Digital Humanities as a critical discipline narrowly bounded by a moralistic definition of criticality – and end up arguing that Digital Humanities is a ‘good’ discipline, because of the content of the work that it produces.⁸ The counterpart to this response is that the addition of technical tools and software and data to humanities research is good, in that it permits critique, again on the level of content. Equally, some suggest that in response to the material effect (and, arguably, cause) of the ‘problem’ of Digital Humanities – the acceleration of neoliberalism in the academy – we should take an accelerationist approach. After all, we

⁷ Brian Greenspan, ‘The Scandal of Digital Humanities’, Carlton Hyperlab blog, January 23, 2018, accessed June 4, 2018, <https://carleton.ca/hyperlab/2018/the-scandal-of-digital-humanities/>.

⁸ Alan Liu, ‘Drafts for *Against the Cultural Singularity*’ (book in process), Alan Liu Institutional homepage, May 2, 2016, accessed November 13, 2016, <http://liu.english.ucsb.edu/drafts-for-against-the-cultural-singularity/>.

can't defeat neoliberalism with interpretation (says Alan Jacobs), so we may as well enthusiastically engage with its effects.⁹

The responses that I find more productive are those that do not dead-end in a narrow definition of critique, but rather break down the dichotomies that the authors of the LARB piece establish: support staff versus researchers, critical-interpretive work versus corporate startup culture, the solo researcher versus the lab. (I should note at this point that Alice Corble's contribution to the LCCT roundtable discussion addressed this very question in more detail than I could do justice to here). Stewart Varner, among others, has argued that the distinction between support staff and researchers is nowhere near as clear cut in this field as is made out. Quoting Laurie Allen, he argues that outside of the specific case of Digital Humanities, '[h]umanities scholarship has always been dependent on "huge amounts of hidden and unpaid or unacknowledged labor" from students, research assistants, contingent faculty, librarians, archivists and others'.¹⁰ Equally, Jacobs highlights the 'long history' of critical and scholarly work carried out under the aegis of corporate funding – Claude Shannon's long employment by IBM is his prime example, suggesting that linking criticality to moral purity would expel us all from the category.¹¹

So what is really happening in this critique of Digital Humanities? One factor is, obviously, a policing of discipline through a concept of criticality understood as a moral category grounded in the interpretive or hermeneutic tradition of literary studies. There is also a genuine attempt to offer some reaction to the neoliberalisation of the academy, but in doing so the authors create a scapegoat in Digital Humanities that privileges a narrow and fairly conservative idea of the conditions under which critical work can be produced.

⁹ Alan Jacobs, 'Critiquing the Critique of Digital Humanities', The New Atlantis blog, May 2, 2016, accessed November 13, 2016, <http://text-patterns.thenewatlantis.com/2016/05/critiquing-critique-of-digital.html>.

¹⁰ Stewart Varner, 'A few thoughts on the whole DH, neoliberalism, LARB thing', stewartvarner.com, May 6, 2016, accessed June 1, 2016, <https://stewartvarner.com/2016/05/06/a-few-thoughts-on-the-whole-dh-neoliberalism-larb-thing/> (Varner is partially quoting Laurie Allen here).

¹¹ Shannon was employed by IBM as a researcher when he produced his groundbreaking communications theory. See Wendy Chun, *Programmed Visions: Software and Memory* (London: The MIT Press, 2011).

Alan Liu, whose own fraternal critique of Digital Humanities is quoted in the LARB article, has rightly pointed out that the concept of critique deployed here is aimed at shutting out other forms of work which might be thought of as critical even if they do not resemble the kind of interpretive, hermeneutic approach that the authors prefer. He suggests Digital Humanities could enact a form of critique through infrastructure as a possible alternative: he turns to social constructivism and neoinstitutionalism from sociology and information science, to create a ‘portfolio’ of methods that together form a ‘weak antifoundationalism’.¹² He says,

Taken together, these approaches explore how organizations are structured as social institutions by so-called ‘carriers’ of beliefs and practices (i.e., *culture*), among which information-technology infrastructure is increasingly crucial.

This seems to me to be a fairly weak replacement for any kind of unbounded criticality, and one which doesn’t necessarily open up the terrain beyond the narrow terms of interpretive critique that the LARB authors seem to prefer. Indeed, he goes on to concede that compared to network studies or new media studies, Digital Humanities avoids ‘broader commentary directed externally at society and social justice.’¹³

Perhaps the best afterword to the original controversy is one provided by David Golumbia himself in a 2017 blogpost. Addressing his critics, and engaging with what he considers to be their misreading of his argument, he suggests that the real issue with Digital Humanities isn’t simply that it takes funding away from the ‘traditional’ humanities by deploying novel technologies in research. The problem is broader, and stems from the ‘alignment of the [Digital Humanities] project against what it falsely projects as ‘traditional’ academic practice.’ He argues that practitioners of Digital Humanities (with a few notable exceptions, including Liu) have no desire to maintain the humanities as they are, and as such accept the definition

¹² Liu, ‘Drafts for *Against the Cultural Singularity*’.

¹³ Liu, ‘Drafts for *Against the Cultural Singularity*’.

of all humanities research (outside Digital Humanities) as ‘traditional’ and therefore as stale and replaceable by Digital Humanities.¹⁴

By untethering the original critique from the question of technology, Golumbia’s argument becomes circular: ‘traditional’ humanities comes to stand for anything outside of Digital Humanities, and Digital Humanities is defined by its lack of interest in preserving anything outside itself. The dismissal of the humanities in general as traditional, he says, is what produces the possibility for Digital Humanities work to so routinely disregard the humanistic research Golumbia finds appealing.

The way in which the original argument is modified is instructive. Although the target shifts (not the destructiveness of the tools used in digital humanities research, but the framing of the discipline itself), the terrain on which the debate plays out is still one which accepts the premise that good ‘critical’ research is humanistic and moral. The alliance between digital humanists and the financial engines of research is threatening to Golumbia because it represents the end of critical humanism as the basis of the critical. Golumbia quotes from Immanuel Wallerstein at length: ‘Historical capitalism has been, we know, Promethean in its aspirations’ and we should thus be suspicious of the Promethean nature of Digital Humanities.¹⁵

Just as I do not want to propose a moral stance towards Digital Humanities as a proxy for a moral stance towards capitalism, I also don’t want to make a proposal for an alternative definition of criticality here. By way of opening this discussion back up to that general question – what are the conditions of production of criticality – I would point to an argument about method made by Jussi Parikka, and more broadly to the value of experimentation as it appears throughout Deleuze’s writing.¹⁶

¹⁴ David Golumbia, ‘The Destructiveness of the Digital Humanities (‘Traditional’ Part II)’ Uncomputing blog, June 5, 2017, <https://www.uncomputing.org/?p=1868>.

¹⁵ David Golumbia, ‘The Destructiveness of the Digital Humanities’.

¹⁶ As laid out in, for example, the plateau ‘Introduction to Schizoanalysis’: see Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 371, especially the footnote quoting John Cage: ‘The word experimental is apt, providing it is understood not as descriptive of an act to be later judged in terms of success and failure, but simply as of an act the outcome of which is unknown.’

Discussing media labs and maker spaces (which we could probably take to be a particular flavour of Digital Humanities space, if we steer clear of the narrow definition that Allington, Brouillette and Golumbia employed), Parikka raises the idea that we need to think differently about the temporality of the emergence of such spaces. He argues that we should ask '[n]ot just *what is a lab* but *why now?*'¹⁷ The lab is a symptom, and as such we should think of it 'not merely as an internal place of new methods or new forms of creative or academic activity but as a fold between such techniques and external political and economic conditions of current institutions'.¹⁸ This is in aid of making explicit the assemblage which engenders such spaces, without an over-reliance on fixing that definition – if we do so, we murder in order to dissect.¹⁹

So, after Parikka, might we be able to ask not just 'what is criticality?', but: 'why is criticality being invoked now, for this end, as the moral kernel to be protected from the neoliberal university?' What if we instead thought of the concept of criticality as itself at stake in this folding of techniques and conditions? And as a corollary to that, in this particular context, why do the lines of the dichotomy 'critical/not critical' appear to fall along the distinction between archive, data, software, image on the one hand and published matter – text – on the other?

I would argue that this points to the limit of criticality as a concept – it is restricted by its pairing with complicity, as it is presented in the original LARB account. If your relationship to your subject (and by extension your discipline and the material infrastructure that supports it) should be critical, properly, and you engage with it 'improperly', you are complicit by default. But complicity needs to be analysed over criticality. The corollary question should be asked, then: What methods are available to us to escape the dichotomy? The way to find out is to experiment with the limits of what might be considered 'critical'.

¹⁷ Jussi Parikka, 'The Lab as a Symptom', Machinology blog, May 10, 2016, accessed June 14, 2016, .

¹⁸ Parikka, 'The Lab as a Symptom'.

¹⁹ See Claire Colebrook, 'Time that is Intolerant', in *Memory in the Twenty-First Century: New Critical Perspectives from the Arts Humanities and Social Sciences*, ed. Sebastian Groes (London: Palgrave, 2016), 153.