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Knowing Why Revolution Must Come: Digital Humanities as Poetry and Prayer

Jacqueline Wernimont

In Joy Harjo's "Eagle Poem" she observes that "to pray you open your whole self" to the world. This is an act not only of openness but also of humility: you "know that there is more / that you can't see, can't hear."¹

Calling in the presence of a "more" that is beyond visual or aural proof, Harjo draws our attention to ways of being and sensorial engagements that exceed dominant Anglo knowledge paradigms. Her "more" points to the many modes of communication, the "cloud-language, cricket-singing talk, and the melodic whirl of hummingbirds" that are so often overwritten by the "violent colonization process" of the English language and Anglo ways of knowing.² Harjo also points to the ways of being, the bodies, spirits, and energies that are "more" than the binary Cartesian models of subject and personhood brought to the Americas during European colonization. To accept, to *know* as Harjo does, that there is more is to eschew the dominance spuriously offered by white supremacy, patriarchy, and imperialism.

Such openness may well feel like a voluntary exposure, a risk, or even a loss, especially for people who reside comfortably within dominant systems. For those who are marginalized, knowledge of the "more" is a condition of being; people inhabit traditional knowledge systems while also knowing that they are perpetually exposed to surveillance capitalism and settler logics.

How might scholarship, research, and teaching be different if it more closely resembled Harjo's model of prayer? In many ways this is a strange question for me to ask as a secular/agnostic person. I do not have a devotional or prayerful practice in any real sense. Additionally, raised in a white enlightenment paradigm that values the "hard" sciences and empirical aural and visual evidence, I feel myself resisting the lexicon of faith.

At the same time, I have been listening to people of color inside and outside academe, and I hear words like *fellowship*, *care*, *kinship*, and *prayer*. I also hear the language of desire and love weave across twentieth- and twenty-first-century feminist work. Centering all of this, I wonder how love, desire, care, and prayer

might transform the futures we create, how they are already transforming the presents we currently inhabit.

In addition to exposure and risk, we can understand such an opening of the self as an act of love and trust. An enactment of the belief that there is in fact more than what dominates, more than what has been delivered to us by a violent history and the ongoing violence of the present. A practice of love for others and for otherness: love for the possible futures that are not the ones imagined in heteronormative, white supremacist, capitalist, and patriarchal paradigms. A trust in and love for the visions of those who have not been afforded security in current sociopolitical formations.

Despite my skepticism of the language of prayer, I find myself trusting that there is indeed more and, increasingly, demanding that we open our scholarly scope to include more. To me, this developing trust feels increasingly essential to survival. It also feels kin to visions of poetry and poetics that have long been a part of my work.

Adrienne Rich in the *Arts of the Possible* observes that poetry is “liberatory at its core.” While poetry for Rich is not revolution itself, it is “a way of knowing” why revolution “must come.”³ It is built from “supreme efforts of care” and made from “words that create rather than attenuate community.”⁴ Working in different contexts but drawing on a shared feminist tradition, Bethany Nowviskie has also invoked “care,” explicitly calling for a feminist ethic of care in humanistic and cultural heritage work. As she notes, an ethics of care “means to reorient its practitioners’ understanding in two essential ways. The first is toward a humanistic appreciation of *context, interdependence, and vulnerability*—of fragile, earthly things and their interrelation. The second is away from the supposedly objective evaluation and judgment of the philosophical mainstream of ethics—that is, away from criticism—and toward personal, worldly *action and response*.”⁵

For me, Harjo’s work eloquently puts poetry and prayer into a single frame and demands not simply a recognition of the vulnerability of others but also a willingness to be vulnerable as well. There is no system of substitution whereby any one of us can step into and experience the vulnerabilities of others. People can empathize with one another, but substitution is not possible. Happily, substitution is not necessary. To open my (white) self to the “more,” to accept and internalize that dominant modes of knowing are not “the one” but part of a plurality, is an act of trust, of love, and of care.⁶

As a call to revolution, Harjo’s “Eagle Poem” asks us to recognize that there is more “in languages / that aren’t always sound but other / circles of motion.”

These “other circles of motion” are necessarily plural. Liberation and justice do not arrive in homogeneous packages. So there must be within our knowledge-making systems a tolerance for—even an expectation of, perhaps—variation and plentitude.

For those of us working in digital humanities, internet studies, and digital studies, this entails acknowledging social media as “a way of organizing knowledge,” as Jessica Marie Johnson suggests.⁷ It means recognizing, as I and others like Gillian Smith, Vera Hall, and Whitney Trettien have done, that craftwork like binding, quilting, knitting, weaving, or sewing are modes of knowing.⁸ It includes feminist data visualization as imagined by Catherine D’Ignazio and Lauren Klein and multimodal performances like those of micha cárdenas, Kaki King and Giorgia Lupi, and the Electronic Disturbance Theater collective.⁹

Every time I teach a digital humanities course, I begin with Jamie “Skye” Bianco’s excellent “This Digital Humanities Which Is Not One.” Quoting from Luce Irigaray’s *This Sex Which Is Not One*, Bianco draws our attention to the ways in which “one” is defined as “the universal standard and privileged form in our systems of representation”; “oneness expresses the requirements for unitary representations of signification and identity. Within such a system, in which the masculine standard takes itself as a universal, it would be impossible to represent the duality or plurality of the female [or any other] sex.”¹⁰

In addition to eschewing a singular and singularizing mode of knowing, Irigaray understood that love, care, and desire were possible vectors of power and appropriation. Attending to the ways in which love, as configured historically in heterosexual relationships, can easily slip into a reduction of the beloved into an object, Irigaray insists on the indirect relationship articulated in “I love to you.” By bringing Irigaray’s language into this theorizing of feminisms and digital humanities, I am arguing that knowing and making in the mode of prayer, openness, and an ethic of care does not reduce other methods, other people, and other histories to the status of an object to be preserved, studied, and known. Instead, such an approach provides “space for thought, for thought of you, of me, of us, of what brings us together and distances us, of the distance that enables us to become, of the spacing necessary for coming together.”¹¹

As Johnson observes, “Doing digital work has created and facilitated insurgent and maroon knowledge creation within the ivory tower. It’s imperfect and it’s problematic—and we are all imperfect and problematic. But in that sense I think the digital humanities, or doing digital work period, has helped people create maroon—free, black, liberatory, radical—spaces in the academy.”¹² Alexis Lothian and Amanda Phillips similarly detail several powerful instances

of digital work that “slips the bounds” in order to produce affective and intellectual networks and knowledge that center “questions of labor, race, gender, and justice at personal, local, and global scales.”¹³ Each asks, as Harjo does in her poetry and as Klein has done in her critical analyses, “are there methods we might use to bring out . . . [what] the eye cannot see?”¹⁴

Both the vision and reality of digital humanities discussed here—feminist, queer, black, latinx, indigenous, crip, and more—has, as Johnson suggests, “offered people the means and opportunity to create new communities. And this type of community building should not be overlooked; it has literally saved lives.”¹⁵ What I hear in the astute work of Johnson, Lothian, Phillips, and so many more is both poetry and prayer. As poetry, each makes clear why revolution must come even as they exercise an ethic of care and create community. As prayer, such digital work is vulnerable and open. Demonstrating visions of the “more” that is already everywhere around us, prayful and poetic digital humanities enacts resistance to monolithic, dominating, and purportedly universal modes of both making and knowing.

Creating, amplifying, surfacing, and caring in and for “other circles of motion,” we work to thrive.

Notes

- My deep appreciation to the community of #transformDH and #femDH and to all who contributed to getting this special issue out.
1. Joy Harjo, “The Spectrum of Other Languages,” in *The Spiral of Memory Interviews*, ed. Laura Coltelli (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 99).
 2. Ibid.
 3. Adrienne Rich, *Arts of the Possible* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), 16.
 4. Ibid., 17.
 5. Bethany Nowwiskie, “Capacity through Care,” accessed April 2, 2018, nowwiskie.org/2016/capacity-through-care/.
 6. While white perspectives and modes of knowing are plural, it is critical to recognize that dominant culture affords white people in the Anglosphere (like me) the comfort of believing in a singular way of knowing. As I suggested earlier, men, women, and nonbinary people of color are forced by white supremacy to constantly experience that there is more than their own way of knowing.
 7. Melissa Dinsman, “The Digital in the Humanities: An Interview with Jessica Marie Johnson,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, July 23, 2016, lareviewofbooks.org/article/digital-humanities-interview-jessica-marie-johnson/.
 8. Jacqueline Wernimont, “Vibrant Lives Presents the Living Net,” jwernimont.com/the-living-net/; and Jessica J. Rajko, Jacqueline Wernimont, and Stejpan Rajko, “The Living Net: A Haptic Experience of Personal Data,” *CHI 2017 Extended Abstracts: Proceedings of the 2017 ACM SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (Denver, CO: ACM, 2017), 449–52; Vera Hall, “Touching History: The Quilts of Vera P. Hall,” shown at “Haptic Bodies: Perception, Touch, and the Ethics of Being,” March 3–4, 2017, Barnard Center for Research on Women. See Gillian Smith’s work on

- computation and craft at sokath.com/main/ and that of Whitney Trettien at whitneyannetrettien.com/.
9. Catherine D'Ignazio and Lauren Klein, "Feminist Data Visualization," in *IEEE VIS Conference Proceedings* (Baltimore: ACM, 2016). micha cárdenas has several interactive artworks including "Becoming Dragon" and "#stronger"; for an updated listing, see faculty.washington.edu/michamc/; Giorgia Lupi, "The Bruises We Don't See," *Medium*, January 31, 2018, medium.com/@giorgialupi/bruises-the-data-we-dont-see-1fdec00d0036; Electronic Disturbance Theater/b.a.n.g. lab, "Transborder Immigrant Tool" www.art-util.org/projects/transborder-immigrant-tool/.
 10. Luce Irigaray, *I Love to You* (London: Routledge, 1996), 221.
 11. *Ibid.*, 149. As the very recent, very public thefts and degradation of work by Mar Hicks and Safiya Umoja Noble demonstrate, in addition to attending to the dangers of care masquerading as objectification, white scholars, public intellectuals, and journalists must pay attention to the enormous distance between an openness to others and other ways of knowing and "attention."
 12. Melissa Dinsman, "The Digital in the Humanities: An Interview with Jessica Marie Johnson" *Los Angeles Review of Books*, July 23, 2016, lareviewofbooks.org/article/digital-humanities-interview-jessica-marie-johnson/.
 13. Alexis Lothian and Amanda Philips, "Can Digital Humanities Mean Transformative Critique?" *E-Media Studies* 3.1 (2013), doi:10.1349/PS1.1938-6060.A.425.
 14. Lauren Klein, "Distant Reading after Moretti," paper presented at the Modern Language Association meeting, New York City, January 2018, lklein.com/2018/01/distant-reading-after-moretti/.
 15. Dinsman, "Digital in the Humanities."