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Manifesto for the Humanities

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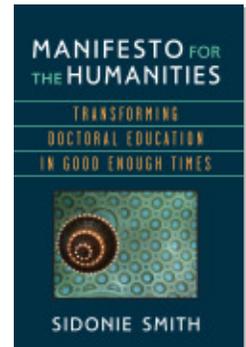
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Knowledge Environments

This is a daunting time, a time of excitement, yes, but also of anxiety about the overload of information and the proliferation of platforms and devices available to humanists in their scholarly lives. Worlds of archives are still out there, in scattered locations, in orderly and disorderly array, to be reached as travel destinations. And worlds of archives, large and small, come online at an ever increasing pace, there to be readily accessed through personal computers, tablets, smartphones, and, now, eyeglasses.

Millions of scanned texts have become fingertip commodities accessible through HathiTrust, a collaboration among Google and more than 80 research universities, whose purpose is to preserve the products of large-scale digitization and to advance the science of shared access within a sustainable governance structure.¹ Millions more items and collections of texts, images, sounds, and videos are accessible to the public through the European Union's Europeana Digital Library, which offers a portal to the holdings of such large institutions as the British Library in London, the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, and small cultural centers such as the Musical Instrument Museums Online. In the United States, the Digital Public Library of America, opened in April 2013, "brings together the riches of America's libraries, archives, and museums, and makes them freely available to the world."² In pooling and preserving vast knowledge repositories, consortia of universities, museums, and independent libraries have expanded exponentially the scale and capacities of what is commonly called the "public goods" archive, the public heritage encompassed in diverse histories of human thought and imagination and, on and off campuses, the repository upon which the production and circulation of knowledge depends, no matter what the discipline, no matter who the seeker. This remarkable ensemble of public goods repositories, what Margaret Hedstrom and John Leslie King refer to as the "epistemic infrastructure of the knowledge economy,"³ has been dubbed the 21st-century version of the Library at Alexandria.⁴

This world of public goods is a world in turmoil. Universities struggle

to adequately respond to the exigencies of library budgets and the rapidly evolving affordances and capacities of code, data, web, and cloud. Libraries struggle to adapt to a radical sea change in what they do, how they catalog, how they preserve, and whom they serve. Academic libraries confront even more of a sea change as they transform from legacy centers for preservation of books, journals, and special collections into ensembles of legacy centers, accessibility portals, “e-research” hubs, publishing enterprises, cyberinfrastructural nodes, and social centers for new modes of teaching and learning. And they confront the vagaries of their partnership with corporate capitalism in such ventures as HathiTrust, a partnership that demands, as Hedstrom and King argue, attention to issues of access, information quality assurance, social memory (to prevent loss of information on the Web), and information property.⁵ Corporate-sponsored and public ventures alike confront thorny copyright issues that have yet to be fully resolved, even as the pace of legal action related to intellectual property escalates. All around, technical, legal, and ethical issues pop up in project-specific terms, as debates around preservation and access, architecture and metadata intrude in daily conversations. Uncertainty, as Hedstrom and King observe, is the lived reality of this epistemic infrastructure.⁶

In effect, this knowledge ecology is a “stay-tuned” ecology, though that metaphor seems so old-media, retrograde in this time. There’s always a next story unfolding, of importance to scholars in the humanities: new horizons of intellectual interest, new practices of observation, new methods to drive interpretations; new tools for producing knowledge; new demands for skills and competencies. There’s always a dynamic imbrication of disciplinarity and interdisciplinarity, always a residue, a surplus, a surfeit, a resurgence. And there’s always the looming insufficiency of human and cyber infrastructures to support the full panoply of scholarly work in its prolific heterogeneity; always the cacophonous demands to keep up and keep up-to-date.

Jerome McGann and Bethany Nowviskie have written eloquently about the formidable challenges of this epistemic infrastructure for academic humanists. Here is McGann writing in 2004 of the prospect for humanistic enterprise in 2053: “In the next fifty years the entirety of our inherited archive of cultural works will have to be reedited within a network for digital storage, access, and dissemination. This system, which is already under development, is transnational and transcultural.”⁷ And here is Nowviskie writing 10 years later, invoking McGann:

We humanities scholars and publics stand before the vast, near-wholesale digital transformation of our various and shared cultural inheritance. This transformation—more properly, these *remediations*—are fully underway.

They open new avenues for the work of the liberal arts in all of its spheres: for our ability to gain access to, to analyze and interpret, and most importantly to vouchsafe to future generations, the words, images, sounds, and built and material objects that crystalize in our archives and which we so carefully position to refract little, mirror-like understandings of what it has meant, for the blink of an eye, to be human.⁸

To capture the importance of gaining support and funding for the vast project of digitizing huge swatches of the world's cultural heritages, Nowwiskie invokes the term "New Deal."

Humanists have complex and distinctive relationships to digital technologies and digitized archives and databases. And these evolving technologies and proliferating platforms increasingly impact how academic humanists think about their projects of scholarly inquiry and their vehicles of scholarly publication. What follows are brief observations about the relationships of humanities scholars to digital technologies across five domains: digitally assisted scholarship; scholarship on digital cultures; born-digital inquiry, including Small Data and Big Data projects; the Internet of things; and the Semantic Web.

In this time of "information abundance,"⁹ *academic humanists are all digitally assisted scholars*, though the range of digital assistance available to them differs radically depending on where they are located globally. This state of interdependency is as true for humanities scholars who describe themselves as doing traditional kinds of humanistic scholarship as it is for those identifying as digital humanists. For 50 years scholarly work has proceeded by means of digital assistance. Over the course of my professional career I've saved versions of essays and books on paper, mainframes, eight-inch disks, five-and-a-half-inch floppies, zip drives, flash drives, and the cloud. I started out on an Osborne, the first portable computer, weighing 40 pounds; and I read green letters on a black background in WordStar. Now digital assistance is second nature as scholarly inquiry progresses through search engines. Through access to digitized archives, collections, and databases. Through an expanding array of organizing and retrieval applications. In the field, humanists keep notes and take photos of documents and material sites on smartphones, tablets, and laptops. They produce endnotes and bibliographies in the freeware of programs such as Zotero. A world of prosthetic assistance and assistants surrounds humanities scholars, even those who take pride and gain pleasure in composing with pencil and paper.

In addition to being digitally assisted scholars, some humanists are *scholars of the digital*. They are found across humanities disciplines, though a good many tend to be identified with media studies. These scholars pursue work

on the cultures of computation, including questions of race and gender and sexuality; of political economy and network sociality; of social justice and multisensory aesthetics; of algorithmic values and the affective life of gaming. They explore the logics of digital architectures and the offline labor practices in the production of hardware and software. They examine the subject positions and subjectivities produced through algorithmic processes. Scholars of online composition research the impact and efficacy of online composition in the teaching of college writing. Others explore how issues of design in the building of databases and online archives render design itself a way of knowing.¹⁰ Scholars in my field, life writing studies, explore the persistence of old forms of life writing in digital environments and the emergence of new genres in social media; they explore how technologies impact acts of witnessing to violence and suffering. Political theorists and humanistic social scientists explore online sociality and political advocacy. And humanists in schools of information study, as does Paul Conway, how the process of digitization in such projects as Google Books reveals the traces of the human hands and human labor involved in cultural preservation.¹¹ Some scholars in these diverse strands of digital studies identify themselves with digital humanities; many do not. Others talk of working on digital environments.

And some academic humanists pursue the strand of scholarly inquiry often encompassed under the rubric of digital humanities (earlier, humanities computing, or what Franco Moretti labels “computational criticism”) with its particular relationship of project to technology to data.¹² In response to the persistent query of “what is digital humanities,” Donald J. Waters of the Mellon Foundation offers a concise and useful gloss on the definitional imperative. Eschewing a fixed definition, he proposes “a typology of the disciplined methods and tools associated with the application of critical intelligence in various kinds of humanistic research,” noting the three central strands that have developed over the last several decades: textual analysis, spatial analysis, and media, but more particularly visual studies.¹³ And he cautions that “there is no single set of so-called digital tools, but multiple sets aligned along broad methodological lines.”¹⁴ The Mellon Foundation has been committed to funding promising initiatives representative of textual, spatial, and visual media analyses; and to supporting scholars pursuing opportunities to transform how it is that humanists communicate their scholarship, about which I will write in the next section.

For me, it is useful to think of digital humanities scholarship, born-digital, digitally envired, as emerging out of the scholar’s relationship to Small Data and Big Data. Increasing numbers of humanities scholars are building small-data archives. Small data are data that accumulate in modest databases

and online archives, data that can be grasped holistically by one person. Some accumulations of small data have already been cataloged in University Microfilms and national repositories. Some accumulations, as William G. Thomas, III observes, are “treasures,” “wonderful materials in small places around the country and elsewhere” that people want to preserve for posterity.¹⁵ Many are DIY archives; and some of those are accidental archives, dispersed, unsystematically assembled, and idiosyncratically curated. Other archives are and will be purposeful, curated, culled; they may have been given a first interpretation or come with purpose-built interpretive tools and platforms. Digital humanities centers across the country and the world are centers of support for archive building, as evidenced in the Mapping Colonial Americas Publishing project at the Center for Digital Scholarship at Brown and the Slave Biographies project at Michigan State University’s MATRIX center. But there are so many more—on the Founding Fathers; on major literary figures, among them Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson and Christina Rossetti; on realms of documents. And there are more and more resources for scholars assembling online archives, such as advice on “best practices in the creation of digital research materials,” available through the scholarly organization NINES (Networked Infrastructure for Nineteenth-Century Electronic Scholarship).

Building archives is becoming increasingly important to many strands of humanities scholarship in ethnic studies, studies of marginalized peoples and communities, studies in history from below, and transnational gender studies. In projects of recovery and preservation, scholars assemble digital museums, receiving, cataloging, and displaying stories and objects registering and animating occluded histories. The Chicana Feminists project launched by Maria Cotera and The Women Who Rock Oral History Archive at the University of Washington, spearheaded by Michelle Habell-Palian and Sonnet Retman, are two such DIY archives. And there is the Global Feminisms project at the University of Michigan, a transnational project of field-based teams assembling a website of oral histories with feminists of all kinds in Poland, China, India, Nicaragua, Brazil, Russia, and the United States, in order to explore “the history of feminist activism, women’s movements, and academic women’s studies in sites around the world.”

Scholars building small-data archives may or may not position themselves as digital humanists. Some may in fact see themselves as critiquing the disciplinary statuses and identities associated with digital or computational humanities. Some may see themselves as enlarging the umbrella, helping to make the field more inclusive of a diversity of players, definitions, projects, and outcomes. Theirs are projects in decolonizing the archive and the algorithm.

Then there are the humanities scholars working on Big Data, large-scale,

large-scope humanities research. Big Data involves huge numbers of texts, far larger than any single person can comprehend and analyze in a lifetime. It ranges from the extensive collections in corpus linguistics to census tracts, from newspaper databases to geographic information systems distantly reading the interconnections of global literatures, and on and on. Digitally envired and digitally intensive scholarship requires methodological flexibility, emerging as it does out of algorithmic numeracy, design architectures in code and visualization, data mining, distant, middle-range, and close reading, comparative analysis, and storytelling. In the 2012 National Endowment for the Humanities report on the first recipients of the “Digging Into Data” grant program, Christa Willford and Charles Henry observed that “‘reading’ large text corpora by machine,” “encompassing an amount of information exponentially greater than would be possible for any individual to take in and process in a lifetime,” is “a subject at once intriguing, daunting, and unsettling.”¹⁶ Daunting projects extend the repertoire of questions humanists can ask of their objects of study and the scope and scale of the stories they find themselves telling of those objects. In 2013, NEH awarded Digging Into Data grants to support such projects as “Resurrecting Early Christian Lives: Digging into Papyri in a Digital Age” and “Annotating Data Extraction from Chinese Texts.”

Debates are rife as humanists pursue and critique this complex constellation of projects, practices, relationships, and implications called the digital humanities. To put it most broadly: Are these projects the future of the humanities or the end of the humanities? Are these projects enabling humanists to add distant reading and surface reading to the commitment to deep reading, or are they the end of deep reading? Are these projects opening the humanities to more diversity or arresting that diversity? Are these projects adding intellectual depth to the academic humanities, or are they merely trendy, often disappointing in their payoff? Is the dazzle of the word cloud generative or just dull?

For many practitioners of born-digital humanities scholarship and their mentees, scaling big extends the theoretical acuity and reach of humanities work. In his early call for the end of the “apartheid” system of literary studies—“on one hand, we have editing and textual studies, on the other, theory and interpretation”—McGann argued that “reality or apparition, a quantum order of bibliographical objects become accessible to us through computerization. . . . The field of textual relations accessible to us through that digital device is statistically significant at a quantum order.”¹⁷ At HASTAC 2011, Josh Greenberg argued that Big Data is “something that lets you see broad/big. Something like seeing society.”¹⁸ And at the International Auto/Biography Association biennial meeting in Canberra, Australia, in July 2012, Sydney Shep

demonstrated how access to large databases demands of the scholar a reconceptualization of the stories data can be harvested to tell, a process that eventuates in rigorous retheorization of terms and social processes, in her case, the transnational social action of the genre of “biography.”¹⁹

Other digital humanists emphasize the interpretive acts required for digging into data, acts central to humanistic inquiry. “In much the same way that encoding a text is an interpretive act,” blogger Trevor Owens observes,

creating, manipulating, transferring, exploring and otherwise making use of a data set is also an interpretive act. In this case, *data as an artefact or a text can be thought of as having the same potential evidentiary value of any kind of artefact*. That is, analysis, interpretation, exploration and engagement with data can allow one to uncover information, facts, figures, perspectives, meanings, and traces which can be deployed as evidence to support all manner of claims and arguments. I would suggest that *data is not a kind of evidence; it is a potential source of information which could hold evidentiary value*.²⁰

For Owen, the evidentiary value of Big Data lies not in numbers but in critical numeracy, that is, in how data can be made to give up their numbers to humanistic interpretation. In a 2013 pamphlet from the Stanford Literary Lab, Moretti makes his case for the value of computational criticism by probing the effects of “operationalizing,” that is, translating concepts into a staged sequence of computational operations. This process at its most promising can enable humanists to “test” their theories by “building a bridge from concepts to measurement, and then to the world,” which for literary studies means moving “from the concepts of literary theory, through some form of quantification, to literary texts.”²¹ Still others, namely Stephen Ramsay, promote an alternative way of engaging Big Data that he terms “the Screwmenutical Imperative.” This engagement is a kind of idiosyncratic “screwing around,” serendipitous romps in which the “algorithmic methods can free us from the tunnel vision that search potentially induces.”²²

Other humanists challenge both the theoretical and the evidentiary value of Big Data as distant reading. In “Diggable Data, Scalable Reading, and New Humanities Scholarship,” for instance, Seth Denbo critiques Big Data projects such as the Google Ngram Viewer and Moretti’s “Distant Reading” initiative, calling instead for a hybrid mode of humanities scholarship, a “scalable textual scholarship” that maintains the commitment to close reading but situates close reading within “the interrogation of massive text objects.”²³ Others metaphorize the seduction of Big Data as a slippery slope that leads to a technologized humanities and a trendy but limited “algorithmic criticism.”²⁴ In his caveats about digital humanities, Alan Liu invokes the phrase slippery

“zone” rather than “slope,” invoking the metaphor of ice skating, with a nod to Yeats: “Knowledge is an ice-skater’s dance on a slippery epistemic surface on which neither the human nor the machine—the dancer nor the skates—alone can stand.”²⁵

More and more humanities faculty and doctoral students are negotiating the terms, protocols, algorithms, and social relations of this human/machine interface, and the forms and etiquette of the dance. Object and process. An “inexhaustible” refulgence of interpretive possibility, though, as McGann cautions, the interfaces at first promise and then forestall the passionate dance of reading, connecting, and interpreting multiple worlds.

In this churning environment, debates about the place of digital humanities, their provenance and affordances, their value and constraints, continue apace, as any survey of e-journals, e-books, anthologies, and blogs addressing issues of digital humanities reveals. So, too, do debates about what constitutes “scholarship” in digital environments; about the understanding of research outcomes; about the evidentiary value of data; about the methodological relationship of numbers and meaning²⁶; about what Christian Sandvig and co-authors pose as the accountability of algorithms.²⁷ The debates will go on, as they continually go on in humanities disciplines and interdisciplines, around issues of theory, methodology, argument, intervention, and stakes.

To sum up, all academic humanists engage in digitally assisted scholarship. Media studies, including the cultural studies of digital technologies and studies in algorithmic cultures, is now a robust field, departmentalized, professionalized, historicized. Small-data archive-building and curation accumulate apace. Born-digital humanistic inquiry mining Big Data is here to stay, even as it remains contentious, often dismissed as the trendy phase in the turn to quantitative humanities scholarship, often demonized as undermining the status of humanistic learning as practiced for centuries. In addition, two new trends in transformative digital technologies confront humanists.

One is the *Internet of things* with its “ambient intelligence and autonomous control.”²⁸ Of course, this trend is most visible in the business world with its data tracking, data mining, and business analytics; and with its iterations of smartness in a succession of objects that scale downward in size and upward in capacity. As a white paper from one such start-up claims: “The Internet’s most profound potential lies in the integration of smart machines and people—its ability to connect billions upon billions of smart sensors, devices, and ordinary products into a ‘digital nervous system’ that will smoothly interact with individuals.”²⁹ The effects of this “digital nervous system,” networking smart people with smart machines, will, in all probability, be felt soon in the world of nonprofit institutions, including higher education and advanced research. Humanists will thus confront the decentering of

the individual scholar in scholarship as they take advantage of the knowledge generated by algorithms, things, and networks in a research environment in which the “connectivity of people and connectivity of devices are no longer independent phenomena.”³⁰ They will be able to take new kinds of research support into the field or into distant archives, wearing devices that aggregate data instantly, allowing them to adjust questions, methods, and theories on the go. Moreover, as Jentery Sayers observed at a fall 2014 symposium, “Digital Humanities and Social Justice,” at the University of Michigan, the Internet of things may be mobilized by activists to enable new initiatives in multipurpose maker’s spaces.³¹ One such space is Seattle Attic, “a feminist, woman-centered, trans- and queer- inclusive space for tinkerers, makers, crafters and hackers of all genders.” Here learners, devices, and networks join to enable new kinds of creativity and expertise.

A second trend has to do with the *web of linked data*, a phrase coined by the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C), the international standards body.³² Scholars in the health sciences and computational social sciences have already begun to exploit the capacities of the Web 3.0, often referred to as the “Semantic Web.” Here is the early vision of Tim Berners-Lee, often referred to as the “inventor” of the semantic web:

I have a dream for the Web [in which computers] become capable of analyzing all the data on the Web—the content, links, and transactions between people and computers. A “Semantic Web,” which makes this possible, has yet to emerge, but when it does, the day-to-day mechanisms of trade, bureaucracy and our daily lives will be handled by machines talking to machines. The “intelligent agents” people have touted for ages will finally materialize.³³

At this interface, the generative metaphor comes from linguistics. With its embedded metadata, interoperable connectivity, and natural language processing capabilities, the Semantic Web mobilizes “self-reflexive” software that can search for patterns of meaning and semantic relationships in purposefully and uniformly structured databases. The Semantic Web can be thought of as a network of software “agents” scurrying to find and interpret data and thereby provide the research assistance normally understood to be the province of human research assistants and doctoral students. For enthusiasts, as Phil Pochoda observes, the Semantic Web “permits fine-grained algorithmic tracking and data mining of many of the endless uses and interactions, connections and disconnections obtaining among humans and a myriad of digital products.”³⁴ For those humanists seeking to understand the forms of prosthetic sociality coalescing at the interface of machine and hu-

man, the software agencies of the Semantic Web will offer new opportunities for granular and large-scale analysis.

All in all, academic humanists find themselves in a radically new environment for doing the everyday work of humanities scholarship. They look to their institutions to “adapt to, support, or sustain” a robust cyberinfrastructure enabling research and scholarship involving multiple partners, Big Data, and machines.³⁵ They scramble to find funding for their projects, from private foundations and from an NEH whose financial stability is always subject to political winds. They find themselves to be just one actor in a collaborative team that joins people from adjacent but also distant fields, some from disciplinary units and some from public goods units, many with different statuses in the university.

Further, they have major concerns about the ways in which their projects of and in digital scholarship will be evaluated and credited in the academy. For these projects make trouble for traditional metrics of faculty evaluation and reward systems. They raise thorny questions about the intellectual work of data aggregation, visualization, and curation; the double expectation that one must “publish” traditional scholarly work off the archive as well as produce the archive; and the scholarly impact and value of producing databases upon which other humanists can build scholarly reputations. To address these changing conditions of humanities scholarly production, faculty chairs, deans, and provosts have to adapt hiring practices, tenure and promotion processes, and salary decisions. They have, in the words of the *One Culture* report, to “expand their notions of what kinds of activities constitute research and reconsider how these activities are supported, assessed, and rewarded.”³⁶

In this evolving environment, academic humanists accrue ever more demanding professional obligations to understand what’s going on and to influence how their needs are met and careers advanced. Many scholars play key roles in mobilizing such sites as Critical Commons, “a public media archive and fair use advocacy network that supports the transformative reuse of media in scholarly and creative contexts.”³⁷ Other scholars caution about the potentially disabling relationship of Big Data to the archive. Tara McPherson, for instance, urges humanists to become key players in the transformations taking place with regard to data and archives, and poses startling questions to be insistently posed: “Can we remake the database for our own interpretative genres? Can our analyses and writing more seamlessly live alongside our data and our evidence? Can we combine human and machine interpretations?”³⁸

In a less speculative mode, Johanna Drucker enjoins humanists to demand a seat at the table when the details of cyber and epistemic infrastructure are on the agenda, or when tools are in the development phase, for the stakes are too high for complacency or willed disregard or enervating frustration. “The task

of modeling an environment for scholarship (not just individual projects, but an environment, with a suite of tools for access, use, and research activity),” she emphasizes, “is not a responsibility that can be offloaded onto libraries or technical staffs. I cannot say this strongly or clearly enough: *The design of digital tools for scholarship is an intellectual responsibility, not a technical task. . . . The scope of the task ahead is nothing short of modeling scholarly activity anew in digital media.*”³⁹ Others encourage humanists to frame sophisticated meta-commentary on the environment itself, from the level of code and architecture to the level of meaning; for, as Liu observes, “Meaning is both a metavalue and a metaproblem.”⁴⁰

Humanities scholars, working by means of, on, and in digital environments, with virtual assistance from tools and platforms, and with access to Small and Big Data, algorithms and machines, enter a research terrain of hardware, software, fleshware, network, and institutional structure; of device and cloud; of interdisciplinary potential and disciplinary aporia. They work in collaborative teams, ensembles in which the center of expertise migrates from one person to another. They discover there the complexities of forging practices and ethics to adequately attribute effort to the different parties.⁴¹ They deploy a range of skills: grant writing, project management, coding, perhaps statistics. During the course of large-scale and small-scale initiatives, they morph through multiple identities, becoming at once or by turns theoreticians, database designers, data curators, and managers. They juggle these ever-mobile processes and ever-mobile devices, in the midst of institutions of higher education, which, according to Cathy N. Davidson and David Theo Goldberg, have “within [them] and in [their] relationship to the community beyond, some mobilizing and some (literally) immobilizing aspects.”⁴² They find themselves located in units where generational identities, methodologies, theoretical investments, technological competencies, careerist goals, and networks of sociality drive colleagues apart and draw them together, often at the same time.

This rapidly changing, radically hybrid, collaboratively configured epistemic environment will tax doctoral students, faculty, and administrators to ply the heterogeneous networks of mobilization, expand the concept of scholarship and knowledge production in humanities disciplines, and rethink the relationship of work in the humanities to the knowledge operations defined as skills, or competencies, necessary for its achievement. The task ahead requires what Nowwiskie describes as “readiness—both as individual, free scholarly agents and as a federated, broad, and unwieldy system of public higher education—to mobilize and properly equip the next generation of scholars and specialist practitioners to move into [the gulf before us]—actively, capably, confidently.”⁴³

Readiness for meeting the challenges of this epistemic ecology requires active participation of humanists in vigorous debates about technological affordances and traditions of humanistic inquiry, about the assemblage and preservation of archives and databases, and about the imperative of heritage-keeping and of improvisational and provisional paradigm-shifting. It calls for flexibility in experimenting with disruptive styles of display, in revising the metrics of evaluation, and in valuing the collaborative relationality of its practice. It demands vigilant attention to gendered and racialized dynamics within humanities fields, including the continued challenge of achieving robust diversity in graduate student cohorts and faculty and the gendered division of labor that finds faculty active in digital humanities majority male. It ratchets up the urgency of pursuing a 21st-century vision of doctoral education.