The Digital Humanities and “Critical Theory”:
An Institutional Cautionary Tale

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Although often criticized for its “presentism,” the digital humanities have actually generated several worthwhile historicizing accounts of its practices and of computing technology’s use in humanistic scholarship (see Earhart; Nyhan, Flinn, and Welsh; and Vanhoutte). These accounts each present a diachronic narrative of how a few pioneers brought technology into humanistic practice in the 1940s and how these practices have expanded and become more self-conscious ever since. What is left out of such accounts is DH’s relationship to other movements in the humanities academy over the same time period, and this has not gone unnoticed: Tom Eyers (a philosopher) justifiably “challenge[s] the model of scientific rationality underpinning much that falls under the banner of the digital humanities” and reminds the field that it cannot simply disavow the problems of earlier humanist debates; Alan Liu notes that, in comparison with new media studies, digital humanities is “noticeably missing in action on the cultural-critical scene,” and he draws attention to the far greater theoretical sophistication of digital artists and activists (491). Despite these critiques, the assumption that digital tool use somehow inoculates digital humanities from other scholarly debates still lingers.

This chapter argues for a version of the history of digital humanities that deemphasizes its uniqueness among humanistic discourses; in particular, it analyzes how (in its institutional reception to this point) the digital humanities bears a striking similarity to poststructuralist theory, which arrived in North America with Jacques Derrida’s famous presentation at Johns Hopkins University in 1966 and which was pronounced dead as an institutional (not intellectual) force in a flurry of books with titles like After Theory and Theory’s Empire: An Anthology of Dissent in the period 2000–2005 (for an excellent summary, see Elliott and Attridge’s “Introduction: Theory’s Nine Lives” in their Theory after ‘Theory’).

In its capacity to attract financial resources, student interest, a patina of innovative “cool,” as well as hostility from those who feel left behind, the digital humanities almost eerily mirrors the rise of its discursive predecessor. Its task now is to avoid
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mirroring poststructuralism’s institutional demise, and for a very specific reason: digital technology will endure and evolve with or without digital humanities, just as critiques of objectivity have outlasted poststructuralist theory. Indeed, the critiques formulated through digital humanities will only become more imperative as the uses of digital technology continue to grow. Many people today are facile users of digital tools, but a properly critical digital humanities can make them reflect on the implications of this use for the transmission, consumption, analysis, and storage of knowledge. Almost everyone on the planet uses Google to search the internet, for example, but critical DH scholars such as Safiya Umoja Noble can reveal the gendered and racial biases inherent in this omnipresent information tool (see, for example, her “Google Search: Hyper-Visibility as a Means of Rendering Black Women and Girls Invisible”). This unique combination of technical/programming practice and critical reflection on that practice could easily be lost in an academy that no longer includes the digital humanities.

Like the histories of digital humanities mentioned earlier, most historical accounts of poststructuralist theory focus much more on the intellectual transformations within the movement than on messy institutional realities such as raising funds, establishing programs, and training graduate students (Habib; Leitch). The chronology of its institutional life is uncontroversial: there was an outburst of influential theorizing between 1966 and 1980, from Derrida’s initiation of deconstruction in three books published in 1967, Barthes’s “Death of the Author” (1967), the English translation of Foucault’s Order of Things (1970), through to Paul de Man’s Allegories of Reading (1982). This was followed by fifteen to twenty years of institutional entrenchment—academic jobs for “critical theorists” appeared, academic presses began monograph series, undergraduate courses became common—and intellectual ferment, notably the development of so-called identity politics around gender, sexuality, and postcolonialism (Eagleton, 1–74). By the turn of the millennium, though, there were signs of critical theory’s decline. Prominent books began to appear with titles such as Life. After. Theory and After Theory (both 2003) and (the more hopeful) Theory after ‘Theory’ (2011). The percentage of MLA job advertisements featuring the term “literary theory” fell off markedly after 2008, and even before then it moved from being a primary to a secondary requirement (typically, one of several).

Poststructuralist theory’s institutional prestige and presence must here be separated from its intellectual importance and persistence (both of which are inarguable). There is, however, a common sleight of hand performed in discussions of this narrative, in which the institutional “death of theory” is proposed as a regrettable commonplace and then refuted by appeals to its intellectual persistence in contemporary theoretical debates. Thus, Elliott and Attridge can state that “there is little disagreement that the era of theory’s dominance has passed,” but also that it is “undergoing transformations far more radical” and is “not only subsequent to but also distinct from the body of work once known as ‘Theory’” (1–3). In this account,
the term “theory” starts as a fallen, once-mighty institutional force, but it is then rejuvenated by its metamorphosis into something new that is just as intellectually fruitful; the enormously diminished institutional presence of this new work is, however, passed over in silence. Poststructuralism’s intellectual influence is fundamental to vital contemporary humanistic fields such as bioethics (in, for example, Eugene Thacker’s fundamental reassessment of what it means to be alive in *After Life*) and the related field of posthumanism (in which poststructuralism’s theoretical decentering of the thinking subject is applied in material and digital contexts).

Neither, however, is likely to produce required courses for philosophy or literature degrees, as was the case with “theory” in the 1990s. As I argue later, an analogous transformation in DH’s institutional presence would greatly impoverish both the academy and the audiences it serves.

In its early days, humanities computing commonly positioned itself alongside other humanities discourses. In 1992, for example, George P. Landow published his path-breaking book *Hypertext* with the subtitle *The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology*. In it, Landow skillfully used critical theory as a familiar set of guideposts with which to lead readers into the new and unfamiliar terrain of hypertext. By the time he published *Hypertext 3.0* in 2006, however, digital humanities existed as a self-conscious academic entity, and (not coincidentally) the presence of “critical theory” in the volume had dwindled precipitously and been replaced with born-digital theoretical discussions that had at best attenuated relationships with figures such as Derrida, Foucault, Kristeva, et al. Landow’s decision to decouple his analysis of hypertext from critical theory is not a slight against the latter, but a recognition of the historical fact that the digital humanities developed outside and apart from the concerns of critical theory; rightly or wrongly, and with no conscious programmatic intent, the digital humanities was institutionally positioned as an entity apart from critical theory, rather than as an inheritor of it. Landow’s assumption that the terms of critical theory could be used as a vocabulary for any new humanistic intellectual field in the first edition of *Hypertext* could not and did not overcome the assumption that the digital humanities was just too different. Nor did the critical theorists lament this separation: not one of the “post-theory” collections mentioned earlier even mentions digital humanities, much less discusses it. For poststructuralist theory’s inheritors, the digital humanities is a comet from another solar system, with no connection to their concerns at all. The glaring absence of theoretical self-consciousness that Eyers and Liu criticized earlier in this chapter thus resulted not from a conscious decision by early DH practitioners, but from a near-complete lack of engagement on both sides.

This unnecessary separation impoverishes both digital humanities and the humanities in general, a point trenchantly made by Liu, and it must not lead the DH community into allowing its mission to be co-opted or blunted. Scholars such as Todd Presner have eloquently argued for the intellectual need to maintain an
alliance between the digital humanities and the “transformative social praxis of critical theory” (66), but what about DH’s institutional relationship to theory? The digital humanities is currently a locus of institutional and cultural prestige and excitement (for all of its claims to beleaguered marginality), but nothing can make it immune to the kind of cultural, economic, and political forces that both helped generate post-structuralist theory and ensured its transformation. Cultural contexts for the academy will change, and in ways that are completely opaque to us now. When the day comes that the digital humanities starts to look shopworn and outmoded as an institutional formation (and this day WILL come), its combination of critical reflection and innovative digital practice must not be lost with it. This synthesis needs to be established as a fundamental part of the humanities, and not one option among others. To that end, I have two major suggestions.

The first is to recognize that the ongoing proliferation of digital tools, devices, and networks in our culture in no way guarantees the continuation of the digital humanities as a meaningful institutional presence (Burdick et al., 102–4). The importance of poststructuralism’s critique of Western assumptions about truth, language, and discursive power was not enough to save it as an institutional presence, and the digital humanities is no different in this respect. The humanities are always grounded in an evolving set of theoretical assumptions about their procedures, but this grounding does not mean that the current set of assumptions are necessarily critically studied or taught. A “theory” course is now only an option in many humanities majors, and even graduate degrees can be obtained without any sustained reflection on the theoretical assumptions that underpin them. The digital humanities faces a similar problem in the academy at large: writing as long ago as 2005, Jerome McGann warned that “digital illiteracy” among humanities scholars threatened their ability to take a leading scholarly role as “the entirety of our cultural inheritance [is] . . . transformed and re-edited in digital forms” (111). His very prescient implication here is that humanities scholars will not have a guaranteed seat at the table as Google, Apple, Amazon, et al. redraw the conditions of knowledge for the world. Precisely because digital technology’s increasing presence is a reality of daily life, scholars will have to fight for the ongoing academic presence of DH’s combination of criticism and praxis in whatever new forms it needs to take. It must be an integral part of what the humanities are, because digital technologies will (more and more) control what we can know and how we can know it.

Second, we need to pay very close attention to the broader institutional changes in higher education. The list of the “revolutionary” information technologies that did not fundamentally change university teaching methods is a long one and includes printing, telegraphy, radio, moving pictures, and television. All the signs are, however, that the digital revolution will finally break the tyranny of the sage-on-the-stage model of higher education and allow it to diversify. At these moments, we need to act on Johanna Drucker’s trenchant reminder that “we were humanists before we were
digital" and that the humanistic project of critique need not be mere empty posturing. Indeed, it is one of the most vital activities that humanists perform, analyzing and evaluating the protean movements of culture. Separating this critical task from the making/programming/hacking that the digital humanities embodies will only hasten its institutional demise as an academic field and leave it feeling as undervalued as many other humanists do today. It may well be true that in the future the academy (especially in the digital humanities) will become more integrated with other cultural institutions, such as museums or digital archives, or, at least, more open to collaboration with them. For the present, however, it is easy to see how DH’s digital skills might be co-opted for a corporatist agenda. Even the advocacy group 4humanities.org justifies a humanities education by producing infographics with titles like “We are Valuable” in which the “value” is purely monetary. This is perfectly understandable given how reluctant parents are to pay for a humanities degree today. But digital humanities needs to justify its critical worth, as well as its earnings potential.

Clearly, more theoretical work is needed alongside the ongoing evolution of DH’s programming and digital tool use. One additional conclusion is clear: the digital humanities has thus far followed a similar institutional path to that of poststructuralist theory, but it is now time to diverge from it. The present cultural and technological moment has secured the digital humanities as a core element of the humanities, not a temporary efflorescence. The field will certainly reconfigure, but it cannot be allowed to dissipate.

NOTES

1. In Digital Humanities, Anne Burdick and Johanna Drucker make a similar point: “As digital tools become naturalized, the digital humanities will struggle to retain its critical, experimental character” (103).

2. See Goodwin, whose graph of requests for “literary theory” in MLA job listings shows steady growth after 1974, a peak in 1988, and a steep drop-off after 2008. Leitch makes the important point that after 2000, “literary theory” is almost always a secondary requirement (125–26).

3. See Wolfe and Hayles for good introductions to this field.

4. Not even Simons in his otherwise wide-ranging collection.


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