Debates in the Digital Humanities 2019

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Forum Introduction

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In her plenary address at the 2014 Digital Humanities conference, Bethany Nowviskie, then director of the Scholars’ Lab at the University of Virginia, introduced herself as “a builder and a caretaker of systems,” emphasizing the equal weight that building and caring each play—or should play—in the field. By characterizing activities such as the maintenance of digital platforms and the enhancement of metadata schemes as acts of care, Nowviskie sought to place the work of the digital humanities in the much broader frame of the Anthropocene—and from there to deep geological time. But one crucial change between the environment of 2014 and that of today is the climate brought about by the current U.S. president and his toxic governance, which has brought increased violence to people of color, to immigrant communities, to transgender people, and to women—to name only a few of the many targeted groups. In this context, the longue durée of geological time still assuredly matters. But so do the living, breathing bodies of the people and the communities that sustain us today.

In assembling this forum on ethics, theories, and practices of care, we seek to draw attention to the range of forms of care that currently sustain the digital humanities as well as to the range of people, in a range of roles, who are currently performing this work. We also seek to promote additional thinking about how care might be even more fully theorized, practiced, or otherwise applied in the field in the future. These contributions do not claim to represent the full scope of discussion on the subject of care in the digital humanities; scholars such as Susan Brown, Kari Kraus, Roopika Risam, and Jacqueline Wernimont, among others, are also doing important work in this area. But the pieces in this forum, both individually and collectively, gesture toward a future of the field in which the work of care is centered in our digital practices, made visible to our wide-ranging communities, and acknowledged each day in our research, teaching, and service.