Capacity through Care

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The sobering environmental and social challenges of the twenty-first century, challenges that face (and link) little cultures and fragile creatures across the implacable Anthropocene, must be met by an academy made capable—in every sense of that open-handed word. It is vital that we take a more capacious view of our history and possible futures and that we organize ourselves to work effectively, simultaneously, and in deep empathy and interconnection with other fields and disciplines across multiple, varied scales. Happily, new datasets and technologies position scholars to discover, interpret, and build on an understanding that has been long desired in the liberal arts: the knowledge of relationships among the largest and smallest of things. But our perpetually erupting anxieties about data-driven research and inquiry “at scale” seem to betray a deep-seated—and ill-timed—discomfort with the very notion of increased capacity in the humanities.

There are obvious and valid reasons for humanities scholars to be skeptical of big data analysis, distant reading, or work in the longue durée: they include problems of surveillance and privacy; the political ends to which data mining can be put and the systems of consumption and control in which it is complicit; intractable and cascading structural inequities in access to information; and disparities in sampling and representation, which limit the visibility of historical and present-day communities in our datasets or filter them through a hostile lens. We can further understand and respect a discomfort with vastness in fields that have, most particularly over the past half-century, focused intently on the little stuff: working in bits and bobs and “small things forgotten.”

Humanities scholars make theoretical and practical advances—including advances in the cause of social justice—by forwarding carefully observed, exquisitely described jewel-box examples. Our small data add nuance and offer counter-narratives to understandings of history and the arts that would otherwise fall along blunter lines. The finest contribution of the past several decades of humanities research has been to broaden, contextualize, and challenge canonical collections and
privileged views. Scholars do this by elevating instances of neglected or alternate lived experience—singular human conditions, often revealed to reflect the mainstream.

The most compelling arguments against algorithmic visualization and analysis are not therefore fueled by nostalgic scholarly conservatism, but rather emerge across the political spectrum. Yet they share a common fear. Will the use of digital methods lead to an erosion of our most unique facility in the humanities, the aptitude for fine-grained and careful interpretive observation? In seeking macroscopic or synthetic views of arts and culture, will we forget to look carefully and take—or teach—care?

I see the well-established feminist ethic and praxis of care itself as a framework through which the digital humanities might advance in a deeply intertwined, globalized, data-saturated age. An ethic of care—as formalized in the 1970s and 1980s by Carol Gilligan, Nel Noddings, Joan Tronto, Virginia Held, and others—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. After all, the chief contribution of the informing feminist ethics of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in relation to earlier forms of moral philosophy, was to see the self as most complete when in connection with others. Kantian morality and utilitarianism had valorized an impartial stance and posited that, as a man grew in judgment and developed ethical understanding, he separated himself from others. The mark of a fully developed (implicitly masculine) self was its ability to stand apart from and reason outside of familial systems and social bonds.

A feminist ethic of care seeks instead to illuminate the relationships of small components, one to another, within great systems—just as many platforms for large-scale visualization and analysis and scholars’ research agendas do. Noddings identifies the roots of this brand of care in what she calls engrossment: that close attention to and focus on the other that provoke a productive appreciation of the standpoint or position of the cared-for person or group—or (I would say) of the qualities and affordances of an artifact, document, collection, or system requiring study or curation. Humanities scholars hone and experience engrossment in archival research and close reading. We perform it in explicating subjectivity. We reward each other for going deep. Yet one concern in the literature of care has been whether engrossment can impede critical, objective disinterest by becoming too intense. I believe the answer is the same for caregiving (nursing, teaching, tending, mothering) as it is for humanities scholarship: real experts are those who manifest deep empathy, while still maintaining the level of distance necessary to perceive systemic effects and avoid projection of the self onto the other. In other words, empathetic appreciation of the positional or situated goes hand in hand with an increase in effective observational capacity. A care-filled humanities is by nature a capacious one.
To me, this suggests that the primary design desideratum for anthropocenic DH and cultural heritage systems must be the facilitation of humanistic engrossment through digital reading (viewing, listening, sensing) and large-scale analysis. Let us build platforms that promote an understanding of the temporal vulnerability of the individual person or object; that more beautifully express the relationships of parts, one to another and to many a greater whole; and that instill, by cultivating depth of feeling in their users, an ethic of care: active, outward-facing, interdisciplinary, and expansive, sufficient to our daunting futures and broadened scope.

NOTES

1. A phrase from a historical probate record that became the title of James Deetz’s seminal book on early American material culture.

2. For an example of the former, see Kirsch and similar essays in the New Republic.

3. On engrossment, see Noddings (17, 69). The best capsule summaries of the critique are to be found in Sander-Staudt, and Tong and Williams.

4. I fully describe the concept of the Anthropocene and offer connections to DH themes and concerns in a DH 2014 keynote talk, later reprinted in Digital Scholarship in the Humanities.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


