Caring Archives of Subalternity?

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Archives of subaltern histories are being built across sectors in India. But the question that needs to be raised is whether in the process of digitizing archives, we are losing out on a close look at the people—the subalterns—whose voice and agency are being traced and mapped. With funding coming from corporate media and interest generated by popular culture, archives of subalternity are being produced by online philanthropic and charity organizations, state-sponsored governance projects, and even digital social justice projects. Though these groups may embark on these projects with good intentions, many of them do not investigate subaltern histories or accord necessary participation in the digitization process to the subalterns themselves. Is being consigned to a dataset doing justice to subaltern history? What of the subaltern citizens themselves?

Still, considering the difficulty of digitizing and organizing information, these popular, commercial, and NGO-based renderings of the digital subaltern should—and will likely—significantly affect projects ranging from digital history collections to cultural archives to big datasets. We must consider how the commercial/marketing and philanthropy platforms themselves navigate issues of subalternity. Add to this mix the range of digital social justice projects that employ gamification and other tech-adjacent techniques in the hopes of connecting the “haves” and “have-nots” through virtual giving and sharing. There are also the big datasets and archives that have emerged through state-sponsored governance projects, such as India’s UID biometrics project, as well as through entrepreneurial and social justice movements (Arora). In this context, what does it mean to build a caring humanities archive of subaltern contemporary lives?

Indeed, we may also ask if we should even be raising the question of “the subaltern.” Digital presence and configurations of access—framed in ways that privilege neoliberal individualization—compel us to revisit the question of subaltern representation, speech, and presence in ways more complex and nuanced than in the traditional writing of history through collection of subaltern archives—whether
oral, textual, or material in other ways. The project of producing, maintaining, and curating (even sometimes gatekeeping) archives of digital subalternity poses many issues. The text/image work and code work we do in the digital humanities are very important indeed, but these efforts must be supplemented and enhanced with dialogic, collaborative, and ethnographic immersion. Such immersion would entail actual travel to subaltern spaces for extended periods of time and honest reporting of self-transformations that occur through such immersive experience. Frictions and contradictions must be worked with—not simplified and flattened. In building archives of subalternity, we need the strong presence of countertexts and counterarguments to prevent those archives from being engulfed by the market logic that aspires to mobilize the “bottom of the pyramid” as consumers. Our charge as humanities teachers and scholars is therefore to continually recover critique through engagement with the communities we seek to understand. For these communities, access to digital archives (and technologies more generally) in and of itself does not ensure access to decision making around the use of those archives and technologies. To care, then, would mean to intervene on behalf of those communities with multiple and countertexts.

Hands-on digital and scholarly/theoretical interventions must draw on continual and repeated (critical, feminist) ethnographic journeys. Dynamics of offline and contextual political economy of the everyday will bypass us if we stay in one place for too long, even while attempting to develop a critical engagement. For instance, looking at examples of online microfinance (e.g., Kiva.org, milaap.org) or the use of comics to empower women in the face of rape (e.g., the digital comic book, Priya Shakti) or games for change that interactively narrate empowerment such as the Facebook group “Half the Sky” (see Gajjala), a researcher might begin to feel really good about subaltern empowerment and social justice movements. But it is only when the researcher goes offline and spends extended periods of time in the environments in which such projects are intended to be received that she will see how westward-looking and devoid of community context some of these projects (and even critiques of these projects) truly are.

For instance, what use is a digital comic for empowerment, or an app that allows microborrowing, when social panics within local community contexts have led to the banning of the very mobile technologies required to employ them? Such was the case in 2016, when the local village heads restricted the use of cell phones by girls and women in the interest of their own protection (The Quint). Building apps, writing comics, setting up an online microfinance site, and “gaming for change” in and of themselves do not fix social evils. It is who the builders of the site and the funders of the startup invite into the process of change, and who they envision as needing to be changed, that are key in how such projects are designed and implemented (Gajjala). For digital technologies to work in concert with social justice movements—to build caring DH projects—much deeper groundwork is needed. Hactivist projects such as those described by micha cárdenas in her article, “Trans
of Color Poetics: Stitching Bodies, Concepts, and Algorithms,” show the need for a
great deal of care and attention to how change might be mobilized through digital
technologies—taking into account the materiality of life and death.

In a global economy where care, altruism, and philanthropy are simultane-
ously commodified and circulated—where the idea of “sharing” is often reduced to
a “click”; where affects flow, scatter, and bounce around; where immaterial labor is
extracted through the interface—only ethnography, done hermeneutically and self-
reflectively, can allow us to see care as a situated notion. When we begin to recognize
how knowledge production is itself framed by a political economy that mobilizes
affect and care to extract unpaid and underpaid work from subaltern and feminized
bodies worldwide, we will better understand the complexity of issues of care in digi-
tal global space. Questions about an ethics of care should be answered differently
based on who and what this emerging field of digital humanities comes to include
and “what disciplines . . . we practice and propagate” (Bianco, 99). Nowviskie, Klein,
and others have already highlighted some issues around the ethic of care and the
contradictions inherent in the labor of care in digital space and in pedagogic envi-
nronments. These are valuable, but we need more DH work that builds theory while
engaging the dynamic lived practices reflective of its global context.

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