

Eternal September of the Digital Humanities

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Here's where I am. It's nearly Halloween, and kids have settled into school routines. I have little ones in my own house and big ones in the Scholars' Lab¹—the youngest of whom are newly, this year, exactly half my age. Other² kids³ are dead,⁴ and it's still bothering me a good deal. Mornings in Virginia feel cold now, and acorns are everywhere underfoot. We're tracking leaves inside.

It's a melancholy way to begin a post, but it situates us.

It's October 2010 in *the social scene* of the digital humanities, and (yes, I'm feeling wry) our gathering swallows Twitter in the skies.

I tweet⁵ a lot. It's a mixture—the writing *and* the reading—of shallow, smart, and sweet. I answer lots of e-mail, too—lots of messages from strangers asking questions. We're doing a good job, my team, and people are asking how. I stuck my neck out on a thing or two, and people are asking why, or for more. This fall, I worked with friends to launch a website that I'm proud of⁶—which is for strangers asking questions. I've stopped answering to⁷ the phone.

There's a bit of a joke around the Scholars' Lab, about the degree to which the boss lady is not *service oriented*. It's funny (as they say) because it's true. But it's only true insofar as I let it be, and most local colleagues realize that I put on this persona consciously, as a useful corrective or (at least) a countering provocation to that strong and puzzling tendency I have noted as a scholar come to work in libraries: the degree to which the most beautiful quality of librarianship—that it is a service vocation—becomes the thing that makes the faculty, on the whole, value us so little. Service as servile. The staffer, the alternative academic,⁸ the librarian, the nontenure-track digital humanist as intellectual partner? Not so long as we indulge our innate helpfulness too much. And not so long as we are hesitant to assert our own, personal research agendas—the very things that, to some of us once expected to join the professoriate, felt too self-indulgent to be borne.

I've written⁹ about¹⁰ these things.¹¹ Others have, too.¹² And—even though service under any banner is undervalued in the academy, and a full-fledged digital humanities center administratively embedded among library services is a rarity—near and

far, DH stays nice.¹³ (Just think, how many other academic disciplines or interdisciplinary work so hard to manifest as “a community of practice that is solidary, open, welcoming and freely accessible”—a “collective experience,” a “common good?”)¹⁴

Here’s the irony. And it’s how we’ll move from a dwindling Virginia October to the eternal September of the digital humanities.

If, on the local scene, I strive to give a habitation and a name to the administrator (yes,¹⁵ even¹⁶ that¹⁷) as driven intellectual partner, for outreach and service to the DH crowd, I’m your girl. The kinds of things I volunteer to organize and do (hosting training institutes,¹⁸ grad fellowships,¹⁹ and friendly unconferences;²⁰ helping raise the big tent;²¹ and providing signposts²² or lacing bootstraps²³ for bootstrapping²⁴), together with my role as vice president and outreach chair for the Association for Computers and the Humanities,²⁵ put me in a position to observe and appreciate the depth of generosity in digital humanities (DH). A truly remarkable and frankly heartwarming percentage of the DH community gives unstintingly²⁶ of its precious time²⁷ in these ways,²⁸ solely for the purpose of easing the path²⁹ for others. And it’s not all organized initiatives. To a degree I have not noted before, the DH community has become conscious that we operate in a panopticon,³⁰ where our daily voicing³¹ of the practice of digital humanities (and not just on special days—every day³²) helps to shape and delimit and advance it. That voicing operates wholeheartedly to welcome people and fresh ideas in, if sometimes to press uncomfortably (one intends, salutarily) against the inevitable changes they will bring. Some of us take this unending, quotidian responsibility too seriously.

I hear, and hear about, our back-channel conversations.

“Eternal September” is a notion that comes from Usenet³³ culture—the early peer-to-peer newsgroups and alt discussions³⁴ that were, for many of us, an introduction to networked discourse and digital identity. Because Usenet activity centered in colleges and universities, a large influx of new students each September had disruptive effects³⁵ on its established, internal standards of conduct, or netiquette.³⁶ About thirty days in, newbies had either acclimatized to Usenet or they had dropped away, and the regular roiling of September could be left behind for another eleven months. As the mid-1990s approached, Internet access became more common and less metered by the academic calendar. Once AOL began offering Usenet to its subscribers, September was eternal.

The Wikipedia article for “Eternal September”³⁷ reads, “See also: Elitism.”

I mention this because I am not unaware of the awkwardness of my position. I have worked in humanities computing for fourteen years. I direct a department dedicated to digital scholarship. I’m a steering or program committee member or executive councilor or associate director of several DH groups and an officer of (arguably) its primary professional society. My dissertation and almost all of my publications and public presentations have been in the area of digital research, scholarship, and pedagogy. (Still, I still have a hard time thinking of myself as a DH insider, or as part of the establishment. This comes, I’m sure, of a profound respect for the two living

generations of computing humanists under whom I trained—and because I matured in the field before Twitter³⁸ and THATCamp³⁹ made everybody instant pals.)

That said, I am positioned to hear the private rumblings of many of the people most inclined—indeed, perhaps *most known* for their inclination to be generous to colleagues in the digital humanities, old and new, and that over the course of years and sometimes decades. I also hear from some I'd consider new to this field, but experienced in ways that make them sensitive to the tides of online collectives. What I most hear is a tension between goodwill and exhaustion—outreach and retreat. I'm sympathetic to the weariness of these people, treading water, always “on.” I feel it, too. But it's their voicing of frustration and possible disengagement that alarms me.

DH is not in Usenet's eternal September, precisely. That is, truly rude or tone deaf or plainly infelicitous tweets, comments, and postings are few enough that they're of little import, even when they grate. I also remain hopeful that we'll soon figure out, among so many bright and sensitive readers, the right balance of promotion for our programs (large or small) with *genuine* expressions of enthusiasm for our work—the rhetoric of always-on.⁴⁰ And for the most part, niceness itself is catching (which may be part of the problem⁴¹). Fatigue will come in waves, to different segments of the networked community at different moments. So it goes. But the “Eternal September” of the digital humanities runs deeper than simple overwork, and most threatens to exhaust us all when our newer colleagues, who are most visible online, make two assumptions: they think that all this is new;⁴² and they think that the current scene⁴³ is all there is.

Most of us are newer and more insular than we realize.

What does it mean⁴⁴ to practice as digital humanists? Some cold mornings, I don't care. We are here to help each other figure it out along the way—by enacting community, building systems of all sorts, doing work that matters in quarters predictable and unexpected. We are *devoted* now like nothing I've seen before. But have you begun to sense how many good people are feeling deeply tired this autumn?

Some of you are hiding it. Some of us should take a breath.

Notes

Published October 15, 2010, at <http://nowviskie.org/2010/eternal-september-of-the-digital-humanities/>. Hyperlinks in the original post have been converted to italics, with URLs in endnotes.

1. <http://lib.virginia.edu/scholarslab>.
2. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Morgan_Dana_Harrington.
3. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Murder_of_Yeardley_Love.
4. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Suicide_of_Tyler_Clementi.
5. <http://twitter.com/nowviskie>.
6. <http://digitalhumanities.org/answers>.
7. <http://twitter.com/foundhistory/status/23933400866>.
8. <http://nowviskie.org/2010/alt-ac/>.

9. <http://nowviskie.org/2009/monopolies-of-invention/>.
10. <http://nowviskie.org/2010/on-compensation/>.
11. <http://nowviskie.org/2010/fight-club-soap/>.
12. <http://lenz.unl.edu/papers/2010/10/08/care-of-the-soul.html>.
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30. <http://melissaterras.blogspot.com/2010/07/dh2010-plenary-present-not-voting.html>.
31. http://tapor.ualberta.ca/taporwiki/index.php/Day_in_the_Life_of_the_Digital_Humanities.
32. <http://digitalhumanitiesnow.org>.
33. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Usenet>.
34. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alt.*_hierarchy.
35. <http://nowviskie.org/2010/uninvited-guests/>.
36. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Netiquette>.
37. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eternal_September.
38. <http://search.twitter.com/search?q=%23digitalhumanities>.
39. <http://thatcamp.org>.
40. <http://twitter.com/#!/nowviskie/status/27368640861>.
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42. <http://parezcoydigo.wordpress.com/2010/10/14/how-far-have-we-come-in-the-digital-humanities/>.
43. <http://twitter.com/dancohen/digitalhumanities>.
44. <http://digitalhumanities.org/answers/topic/doing-dh-v-theorizing-dh#post-437>.