Digital Humanities as Critical University Studies

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In her 2011 article, "All the Digital Humanists are White, All the Nerds are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave," Moya Z. Bailey unearths a radical, unrealized potential in the Digital Humanities that few have made explicit since its articulation: a practice of the digital humanities that is also a practice of critical university studies. I cite Bailey here in full:

> In blog posts, Miriam Posner and Bethany Nowviskie have both addressed the structures that impede women from connecting to digital humanities. The increase of women in higher level positions within universities have led to changes in the infrastructure, with child care and nursing nests cropping up on campuses across the country. Similarly, people of color have been engaging in critical university studies long before the 1990s when the field is said to have emerged. By demanding space as students and faculty, in addition to advocating for rights as the laborers that built and maintain these institutions, people of color have organized through concerted effort to bring about changes in institutional culture and structure.

The question of diversity and inclusion that informs this intervention is intimately linked to institutional austerity and the precaritization of intellectual labor. Post-2008, the economic pillaging of the university is undeniable. It is also undeniable that the digital humanities emerged as a contemporary force for disciplinary transformation during this precise economic shift. Matthew K. Gold states this matter of factly in his introduction to the 2012 *Debates in the Digital Humanities* anthology, "The Digital Humanities Moment": "At a time when many academic institutions are facing austerity budgets, department closings, and staffing shortages, the digital humanities experienced a banner year that saw cluster hires at multiple universities, the establishment of new digital humanities centers and initiatives across the globe, and multimillion-dollar grants distributed by federal agencies and charitable foundations."

The university's loss coextensive with DH's boon requires further interrogation. This paper builds on Bailey and Gold's work by directly linking concerns in DH for diversity and inclusion to economic disparities in the university via critical university studies. I do so not to condemn DH for its rise, but to continue to unearth its radical potential. While the literature in critical university studies is broad, I connect DH to two critical university approaches in particular: decolonial feminism and Autonomist Marxism. Both approaches augment current debates in DH as they forefront questions of inclusion, diversity, and economic variance, but also provide more pointedly political approaches to pedagogy and tool-use.

In her 2003 book, *Feminism Without Borders*, Chandra Talapade Mohanty claims that "the moment we tie university-based research to economic development–and describe this research as fundamentally drive by market forces–it becomes possible to locate the university as an important player in capitalist rule" (173). This claim is couched in a decolonial method committed to developing "the urgent political necessity of forming strategic coalitions across class, race, and national boundaries," but it is also motivated by a commitment to feminist struggle (9). The university is a site of decolonial feminist struggle in particular because it is a "contradictory place where knowledges are colonized but also contested […] It is one of the few remaining spaces in a rapidly privatized world that offers some semblance of a public arena for dialogue, engagement, and visioning of democracy and justice" (170). What follows is therefore a simple claim, but one that is difficult to reconcile in a contemporary context, especially as it might apply to DH: "Feminist literacy necessitates learning to see (and theorize) differently–to identify and challenge the politics of knowledge that naturalizes global capitalism and business-as-usual in North American higher education" (171).

It does not take a careful reader to detect a radical undercurrent to Mohanty's interest in feminist literacy, nor should it be a surprise that those disproportionately affected by institutional inequity might rely on a radical political logic with which to situate their intellectual labor. Perhaps the strongest emergent DH interest in which Mohanty's work carries the most methodological weight, however, is found in Roopika

Risam's essay, "[Navigating the Global Digital Humanities: Insights from Black Feminism](#)." There, Risam argues that

> As the field of digital humanities has grown in size and scope, the question of how to navigate a scholarly community that is diverse in geography, language, and participant demographics has become pressing. An increasing number of initiatives have sought to address these concerns, both in scholarship–as in work on postcolonial digital humanities or #transformDH–and through new organizational structures like the ALliance of Digital Humanities Organizations (ADHO) Multi-Lingualism and Multi-Culturalism Committee and Global Outlook::Digital Humanities (GO::DH), a special interest group of ADHO.

We see similar issues at work in #transformDH and feministDH more broadly. However, Alan Liu's recent claim to a [critical infrastructure studies](#) augments these concerns. Liu summarizes his interest in critical infrastructure studies as a "call for digital humanities research and development informed by, and able to influence, the way scholarship, teaching, administration, support services, labor practices, and even development and investment strategies in higher education intersect with society." The rhetorical shift from "critical university" to "critical infrastructure" is interesting here. Where Liu goes so far to say that most, *if not the whole of our lives*, are organized through institutional mechanisms formative of a "social-cum-technological milieu," "the word 'infrastructure' give[s] us the same kind of general purchase on social complexity that Stuart Hall, Raymond Williams, and others sought when they reached for their all-purpose word, 'culture.'" Paired with Risam's work above, Liu draws us to closer to a critique that would mirror Mohanty's.

At the same time, Mohanty's decolonial approach dialogues with Autonomist Marxist approaches to the same problem. Writing of their work with CAFA (Committee for Academic Freedom in Africa), George Caffentzis and Silvia Federici comment on institutional formations like those that Mohanty invokes, but also those that are already operative in DH: global initiatives organized around a common goal. Where Caffentzis and Federici depart from the question of DH infrastructure is certainly a question of technological focus, but also it is also a political one. "As was the factory," Caffentzis and Federici write, "so now is the university" (125). The import of this claim comments on our institutional alliances, as well as our collective understanding of what educational institutions are for. Thinkers of critical university studies define the university this way because it maximizes the forms of solidarity that are available to us in the face of sovereign institutional control.

For both DH and the Autonomist approach, solidarity is most prominently featured in tool-use and production. Following Caffentzis and Federici, Gigi Roggero mobilizes critical university studies toward a reinvention of the tool. In his article, "Notes on Framing and Reinventing Co-research," he argues that "tools of inquiry have to be reinvented at the level of the general intellect's networks, going beyond the division between the virtual and the real," in order to maximize living labor's break with capital, opening up a space for co-research to form a "material base for revolution" (520-521). DH's reinvention of the library, the archive, and the application of technology to humanistic inquiry more generally have never been more apt. At the same time, a strong dialogue with Liu and Risam's work, stemming from Bailey's claim to DH as critical university studies, is brought to the fore in Roggero's work.

This paper concludes by theorizing what forms of alliance/solidarity might be drawn between DH's transformative work at the level of infrastructure with critical university studies' political work at the level of the institution. I argue that the university is not a freestanding institution; it is embedded within processes of real subsumption that span the whole of contemporary life. Concerns for diversity and inclusion are contoured by this fact, and the transformative power of tool-use extant in DH praxis resist it.