

Interrogating Infrastructure -- Opening Remarks

Alan Liu, King's College, 8 July 2016

- A prevalent contemporary understanding of the humanities and arts is that their highest research mission is to interpret and critique (with apologies to Matthew Arnold) the best *and* worst which has been thought and said in culture--with the end not just of knowing culture but of evaluating it ethically, sometimes to the point of social-justice activism.
- If that is the case, then the question has been asked--sometimes (and recently) quite pointedly--how well, if at all, do the digital humanities contribute to that humanities mission as it suffers under the onslaught, for example, of neoliberalism?
- The most constructive way to address this question, I think, is to realize that it's actually a muddle of two questions. The unintelligent or misinformed one is: can or should digital humanists be doing interpretation and critique in common with other humanists (the answer is simply "yes"). The more productive, sharply focused question is the following, which will repay ourselves as digital humanists to take seriously:
 - What kind of interpretation or critique is uniquely appropriate and purposive for the digital humanities? That is, what kinds of interpretation and critique not only allow the digital humanities to join up with leading modes of humanities research but could not be conducted *except* through digital humanities methods that lead in their own *métier*--that being to use technology self-reflexively as part of the very knowledge, and not just instrument, of researching and acting ethically on society?

- I suspect there will be several kinds of answers to this latter question. But one, surely, is that the digital humanities are uniquely placed to interpret and critique culture at the level of infrastructure—where “infrastructure,” the social-cum-technological milieu that at once enables the fulfillment of modern human experience and constrains that experience, now has much of the same scale, complexity, and general cultural impact as the idea of “culture” itself. It may be, in other words--that in late modernity when the bulk of life and work occurs under the influence of organizational and institutional social-technological infrastructures (undergirded by national or regional infrastructures such as electricity grids and global-scale infrastructures such as the Internet)--the experience of infrastructure *is* operationally the experience of “culture.”
- This is to say that the word “infrastructure” today has the potential to give us the same general purchase on social complexity that Stuart Hall, Raymond Williams, and others sought when they reached for their all-purpose interpretive and critical word, “culture” --even if the alignments and misalignments, overlaps and occlusions, and habituses and taboos that complexly bind the two concepts have yet to be mapped.
- The consequence of such a convergence between the ideas of infrastructure and culture for humanities research may be predicted as follows. Especially under the leadership of the digital humanities (partnered ideally with new media studies and science technology studies), interpretation and critique must begin to focus on infrastructure to have any hope of creating tomorrow’s equivalents of the great cultural-critical statements of the past. Tomorrow’s E. P. Thompson writing about the making of the working class; C.

Wright Mills about white collars; Raymond Williams about culture and society; Michel Foucault about discipline or sexuality; Judith Butler about gender and performativity; Donna Haraway about cyborgs; Homi Bhaba about hybridity; or (very recently in his new book titled *Culture*) Terry Eagleton about “civilization” vs. “culture”—among many more who could be cited—will need to include in their interpretations and critiques attention to infrastructure as that cyborg being whose making, working, disciplining, performance, gender formation, hybridity, and so on are increasingly part of the core identity of late modern culture.

- What would the method for such a vital humanities cultural criticism focused on infrastructure actually look like? . . .
 - (A) It could focus on intramural academic and digital-humanities infrastructure. The digital humanities are especially attuned to the need for attention to such infrastructure at scales ranging from individual projects and methods to enterprise technology.
 - (B) It could focus instead on extramural critique—much in the mode of new media studies, which has so far had a higher level of interest in such contemporary issues bearing on social justice as surveillance, privacy, the “googlization of everything,” race, gender, social media for social movements, etc.
 - And (C)—perhaps the unique niche that a progressive digital humanities could occupy—it could focus on the rich, intertidal zone between “A” and “B” above—

that is, the brackish, mixed flow zone between academic digital infrastructures and infrastructures in the greater sea of society that less apologetically capitalize, surveille, googleize, racinate or deracinate, gender or degender, and politicize or neoliberalize culture.

Just as an instance: I have for some years been serving on the committee at my university in charge of advising on investments in, implementation of, and policy governing enterprise-scale information technology. The issue in the last year has been whether my campus (like many others facing the same quandary) will be committing to the next-generation cloud systems of Microsoft 365 or Google Apps for Education. My consistent questions as a digital humanist on that committee have been (put metaphorically): what brackish waters are we entering when corporate-scale enterprise ecosystems meet our scholars' DIY projects, including those in the digital humanities? Is brine good? And for whom?