Both There and Not:
Critical Digital Literacy in the Humanities

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This short talk was a part of a panel, "Digital Literacy in the Classroom," organized by Ann Hanlon and Abigail Nye (University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee), and which included Harriett Green (University of Illinois Urbana Champaign), and myself, at the 2016 DLF Forum in Milwaukee, WI, on November 8, 2016.

First, I want to thank Ann Hanlon and Abigail Nye for inviting me to be a part of this really wonderful panel along with Harriett Green, whose work I've long admired. This topic, of digital literacy in the humanities, is really important to me and there's so much good work happening in and around it right now, so it's great to be here with all of you to discuss these issues in a generous and generative environment like DLF.

The goal of my short talk is to continue to work toward critical pedagogies for teaching digital tools in the humanities by looking through, around, and beyond the tools themselves. I use the word "critical" to mean a kind of questioning: both a questioning, and therefore pushing at the bounds, of what digital literacy is and can be, and a centering of the formulation and asking of questions, again, both through, around and beyond our digital tools.

This kind of criticality is not a rush to judgement, but quite the opposite, it emphasizes slowness, empathy, diversity, intersectionality, and ethics. As Kim Christen Withey said this time last year in her wonderful talk, "Press Pause: Slowing Down Digital Humanities," we need to be aware of "the gaze that digital humanities is producing. These practices and the projects we produce are about seeing and being seen. They are quite literally grounded in a new visual field."

I believe we are all increasingly aware that the digital both illuminates and elides, whether that be done via algorithms, archives, or various kinds of visualizations. And so, this is a talk about digital literacy, but it's mostly a talk about seeing, what's both there and not.

Looking

Just the other day, in separate conversations and mediums, a few friends asked me for a book recommendation. When I am confronted with this question, a question I simultaneously love and dread, I usually prefer not to answer right away, but to take some space and consider the person who asked it—what have I read and loved that they might also? And so, given context, I will often provide different answers to the same question, even if asked on the same day. Lately, however, in a reflex that sounds like saying we all need this, I've been recommending to those who ask, and, I'll admit, at times to those who don't, the same book, over and over, a book of poems by the poet Solmaz Sharif, a book named *Look*.

Look is a vitally important work in such militarized and mediated times, a time of surveillance and drones, of perpetual war. Within her poems, Sharif inserts terms from the U.S. Department of Defense's Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms, words like SHADOWING, NEUTRALIZE, COLLATERAL DAMAGE, and DESIRED PERCEPTION. She does this for a number of reasons, including to make these obscure words seen, to remind us that, as she says, "It matters what we call a thing." And yet while it is these words and their cold and calculating definitions that may stand out—quite literally as they appear in all caps—as with all good poetry, it is what's both there and not that matters. As Mina Tavakoli has described Sharif's poetry in Look, "Lines elide and enjamb, dropping unprompted into the vacant page. The chilly gulches between words give us much to chew on: As with our military language, there is too much space between what the poetry does say and what it wants to say. There is a sense that something bulges invisibly beneath or between these words."

Sharif's poetry startles and unsettles (after all, we do not seek poetry for comfort), and it, too, I think, speaks to this grappling with naming, with representation, and with these elisions and spaces-in-between that we are confronted with when using digital tools, these things that situate us within Christen Withey's "new visual field." The context and consequences are different, without a doubt, yet perhaps not always as distant as we might think, thus the extreme importance of literacy. And so, we need to begin by looking.

Seeing

So, once we are looking, how do we begin seeing? A few years ago I gave a talk that Ann so generously referenced earlier, "Never Neutral: Critical Approaches to Digital Tools and Culture in the Humanities." A central piece of that talk was a pedagogical experiment for understanding technology and context, specifically through a holistic analysis of digital humanities tools beyond the process of learning how to use them. Indeed, if you visit the website for any particular tool, you will often find a short description of what it does, as well as accompanying documentation and tutorials to help you use them, but even before beginning that process, we (librarians, scholars, students) can and should begin to do more critical looking, or, seeing.

This exercise is really quite simple. It uses the metadata fields developed by the DiRT Directory as a series of prompts and questions to critically engage digital tools and explore their contexts. In so doing, it helps us go beyond the often cold and quick instrumentalism of learning a tool, but, rather, allows us to slow down our process, opening up a critical engagement with the spaces-in-between. Once engaged, working through these metadata fields helps us to better understand, for instance, how and why the tool was created and by whom, or where it is situated amongst an ontology of digital humanities tools, and more.

I find this exercise particularly useful in the humanities, for within the digital humanities, many of the tools we've used, historically, were not made by or for humanists, and are often incompatible with the kinds of inquiry we'd like to pursue. In fact, it is precisely this kind of critical seeing that has led to the increased development of digital tools being made by and for humanists, such as Voyant, Palladio, or Serendip. These new humanist tools do not look to generate answers, but, at least I believe, are best at helping us develop questions.

Asking

Formulating and asking questions is what helps us explore the spaces-in-between, to go beyond what is so clearly there, to help us explore what's both there and not. Indeed, the more obvious our digital tools and their visualizations are, the harder they can be to engage in any meaningful way, and so pass through us like so much cliché and commercial vernacular—unaffected and ineffective.

Questions and questioning also helps us decenter technical mastery in favor of play, conceptualization, narrative, connections and relationships, embodiment, and learning. Yet, as anyone working in any kind of literacy knows, asking good questions can often be just as difficult and fruitless as fixating on and accepting answers. This is exactly the problem Kyla Wazana Tompkins has so brilliantly taken on in her essay and accompanying resources, "We Aren't Here to Learn What We Already Know."

While Tompkins has developed a pedagogy for developing better questions in relation to studying works of theory, I believe her methods can be just as important when applied to critical digital literacy of tools in the humanities, especially when sustained throughout the life of an undergraduate course or scholarly research projects. Her process is vocal and visible, collaborative and committed, edited and open-ended. She has students actively talking through the work of theory together as a group, and our literacy activities should center this as well, the collaborative exploration of digital tools. As Tompkins says in the final lines of her essay, "We come together to be unlovely and take ourselves apart, in order to mutually construct even more difficult ideas. It's not supposed to be easy. The labor is what makes it beautiful."

Visualizing

We've looked at ways of questioning and seeing around and beyond the digital tools we use in the humanities, but what of questioning and seeing through them? I use the word "through" here deliberately, to mean both a symbiotic process of working with a particular digital tool, and as a way of making transparent what it makes opaque. Learning through media, through using digital tools, through experiences of expressions of form, is so vitally important and generative. Indeed, through the slowing down Christen Withey asks us to do, she and her colleagues have been able to create immensely important digital tools, like platforms such as Mukurtu.

I would like to discuss an exercise I've found useful, and that I think begins to get at some of these issues of critical digital literacy, an in-class group exercise called "Visualizing Elision." Before class, undergraduate students read two works. The first is "Opaque is Being Polite: On Algorithms, Violence, & Awesomeness in Data Visualization" by Jen Jack Gieseking, which discusses the notion of "violence" visualization can do. The second is "Humanities Approaches to Graphical Display" by Johanna Drucker, which discusses the notion of "capta," that data is not given, but rather taken.

If you've read the Drucker's article, you know she, in collaboration with Xárene Eskandar, spends a good deal of time creating humanist visualizations, ones that can be highly subjective and complicated to orient oneself within. Some of the students really got some of her visualizations, but many also seemed disoriented (which is, of course, part of the point). I felt similarly, that the visualizations raised so many questions for me through their already complicatedness. So, in order to do this ourselves, while also seeing and questioning an existing visualization, we turned to a map from the Mapping the Republic of Letters project.

This single visualization of an author's correspondence was a prompt, to sit with and discuss, to ask questions of, to speak with and through and so also question the work it does through its familiarity and simplicity. Without using the tool itself, but through talking together, the students and I started coming up with a list of what this visualization does not show but that which might be important to understand when, in this instance, thinking about correspondence, social networks, transnational cultures, politics, etc. We came up with a long list, including multiple temporal dimensions (when a letter was written versus when it was sent and received), questions of space (were the letters really written or just sent from where the authors lived), labor and geography

(how and where those letters traveled to reach their destination), the content and impact of the letters, and more.

While the students brought these elisions to light, I drew graphical representations of them as best I could on the whiteboard, these new lines and figures intersecting and interrupting those of the original visualization. When we were done, it seemed like a lot to take in, so I turned off the projector and there stood our Drucker-esque visualization we'd created together, now capta, in all its complexities, the visual manifestation of discussion, questions, elisions, and spaces-in-between.

Through this working and talking together, these weird, humanist visualizations can work extremely well as ways of thinking through, asking questions, complicating the obvious, enabling new ways of seeing, illuminating elision, and helping us explore what's both there and not.