This essay is about methodology in the humanities. It begins with a discussion of one episode in the history of the most basic practice of humanities research: note-taking. Annotations, marginalia—all of the methods of sifting, highlighting, and gathering comprise the substrate of our larger claims and discoveries. That is true even when one is working with “big data,” topic modeling, natural language processing, and so on. It concludes with a reflection on the claims for methodology in and as what is being called “the digital humanities.”

Giorgio Agamben warns, in his small but challenging book on method, The Signature of All Things, that “every inquiry in the human sciences—including the present reflection on method—should entail an archaeological vigilance,” must “retrace its own trajectory back to the point where something remains obscure and unthematized” (8).1 So let me declare up front that these ruminations grow from three sources. The first is a long scholarly fascination with method—the establishment of concepts of evidence, the relating of reading to interpretation (where both of those terms are used broadly), the relation of method to theory, and the weaving of daily practices into concepts of disciplinariness and disciplinariness into daily practice and feeling. These matters have recently come back into frequent conversation in the humanities, in part because of discussions of “surface reading” and “distant reading”—subsets of a self-interrogation particularly in the literary humanities about how we should respond to the conjunction of defunding and changes in the cultural role of scholarly critique. The second spur is the active conversation about “the digital
humanities,” both the tenor and the content of that conversation and its taking up of the terminology of method. And the third is where I will begin: Walt Whitman’s marginalia.

Figure 1. Walt Whitman marginalia from the Trent Collection, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Duke University.

Practice

In his poetry, Whitman famously depicts himself as a “rough,” an untamed, telluric expresser of the American land and its peoples’ way of life. Yet his annotations reveal that from classical rhetoric to the poetry of Tennyson, from Persian mysticism to nineteenth-century phrenological journals, the influences on Whitman’s work were historically deep and culturally diverse. Whitman’s responses to that reading, written in stand-alone annotations, in the margins of books and periodicals, and recorded in conversations, range from the caustic to the puzzled to the awestruck,
and take the form of everything from simple underlining of significant passages to full-length critical expositions.

These documents, scattered in at least ten different repositories, offer concrete evidence of Whitman’s literary debts and challenge a range of assumptions about Whitman and the relationship between American literature and cultural and intellectual history. If you want to trace what Wai Chee Dimock calls American literature’s pathways “through other continents,” this collection of documents is an excellent place to start, as it ranges widely across the literatures of the world. But there are formal lessons to be learned here, too, because Whitman’s compositional technique itself derived in part from his annotational habits.

Defining any genre within Whitman’s œuvre is tricky, since he made a habit of hybridizing different literary forms for most of his career—breaking boundaries was his style.
There are thousands of documents on which Whitman wrote, for example, no more than a simple identifying citation (as in the case of hundreds of newspaper clippings). And there are a host of documents that show him grappling with a previous author, but that are known to be drafts of later-published work or lectures. With funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities, a team of faculty and graduate students at the University of Texas and at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln identified, scanned, transcribed, and in 2015 will make available to the public 800 pages’ worth of documents with significant annotations identifiably in Whitman’s hand. We call “annotations” notes about reading where we can identify the text Whitman’s referring to (or at least can tell that he is responding to one), and “marginalia” notes he makes directly on a text he read. We make that distinction to focus on Whitman commenting on other writers’ works, rather
than notes in which the poet plans or revises prose pieces or poems, which are being digitized by
another branch of the *Walt Whitman Archive*, where our work will be published.

Whitman’s marginalia reveal crucial links between his social context and his poetry—the
themes and sparks of some of his most famous poems may be found recorded in the margins of his
reading in nineteenth-century books and periodicals. Finding such connections can bring startling
new interpretations to bear on Whitman’s poetry, and indeed, suggest useful methods for research
into other nineteenth-century authors’ works. Take *Leaves of Grass*, for example, the poet’s most
influential work. Matt Miller has recently demonstrated that when we turn to Whitman’s
annotations, we discover a different chronicity to the composition of the first edition of *Leaves of
Grass* than has been assumed. Rather than composing his famous 1855 text largely from scratch
beginning in a mystical inspiration starting in late 1853, the poet transformed notes he had taken
earlier (on a range of texts and about American literary style) into long poetic lines.

Figure 4. Whitman annotations on Greek intellectuals, Trent Collection MS 4to 86, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book and Manuscript
Library, Duke University.
An annotation on Greek intellectuals in the collections at Duke University offers an example (fig. 4). While annotations such as this may not appear to be poetry, Miller points out that not only do they often feature content that ends up in his poems, but Whitman’s annotational style, with its hanging indentation and topical fragmentation, “looks like his signature line” (118).

More fundamentally, Miller’s work suggests, Whitman’s compositional method relied upon annotations no less than on poetic transformation. Whether writing poetry or prose, the poet turned to the notes he had taken—during reading, or following a conversation or performance, or from his imagination—when it came time to generate his work. Thus Whitman’s annotations are key to understanding not just the sources and the chronology, but the very form of both his poetry and prose. Indeed, it is possible to see in some annotations the layering of literary theory, content, and practice. In another document from the Duke holdings, Whitman engages with Jean-Jacques Rousseau, taking detailed notes on the French writer that illuminate Whitman’s relation to continental literature and philosophy (fig. 5).

Figure 5. Detail of a page of Whitman’s notes on Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Trent Collection MS 79, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University.
But the poet also makes a meta-note about how to handle figures like Rousseau: “An American poet may read Rousseau,” Whitman notes in a box at the top left, “but shall never imitate him. — He is a curious study, and will cause some contempt.”

Whitman was a textual hacker literally and figuratively, cutting and pasting, but also messing with the codes for textual transmission, having learned the language of print first-hand at the compositor’s case.

In an essay on Whitman’s notes and drafts in a copy of John Brainard’s poems, Nicole Gray offers a spectacular example of how one small set of marginal annotations (and crossings-out, and cuttings-out) can refract the literary history of a host of poems, paintings, letters, newspaper accounts, and social interactions (fig. 6). For a brief period in the late 1880s, Whitman used this book published in the 1820s (and forgotten today) as notebook, scrapbook, and inspirational text. Gray suggests that, taken together, Whitman’s annotational practices suggest a much broader set of
uses for marginalia than the scholarly literature currently accounts for. “The essential and defining character of the marginal note,” according to Heather Jackson, “is that it is a responsive kind of writing permanently anchored to preexisting written words” (Marginalia 81). That seems a pretty basic and convincing definition.

Figure 7. 1845 article, “The French Moralists,” from the American Review, annotated, but then clipped—un-anchored—by Whitman. Trent Collection, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University.

But as Gray points out, and as the examples I’ve already shown illustrate, Whitman’s annotations defy even the most basic of characterizations, as they “are sometimes responsive, sometimes not;
they are sometimes anchored, and sometimes not; they respond to preexisting written words—but also spoken words” (471). She goes on to suggest that a temporal rather than a spatial approach to thinking about annotation might hold in Whitman’s case—that these notes are occasional, in a multivalent way. They are notes made on a particular occasion, in a way that responds to mise en page as well as textual content. They are also often notes made toward another, as yet undefined occasion, frequently (as we know in retrospect, but as Whitman may or may not have known at the time) a re-purposing of another writer’s text for use in Whitman’s own poetry.

Searching periodical databases has made our job of identifying such items much easier—indeed, in one of several ongoing projects of this sort in American literary studies, Stephanie Blalock at the University of Iowa has used that technique to find hundreds of previously unknown reprints of Whitman’s early fiction, transforming our sense of his popularity as a fiction writer. But because many of the periodicals Whitman borrowed from aren’t extant or are unlikely candidates for digitization, or because the textual transformations Whitman wrought exceed the dimensions of computationally reasonable n-grams or NLP algorithms for identification, we’re still reliant upon a human reading these documents who has also read the poetry.²

Digitization and free access to these annotations will change dominant interpretations of Whitman’s poetry, partly through revelations about dating and sources, and partly through recontextualization. The annotations also speak eloquently to the recent surge in transnational approaches to American literary study. Whitman’s “Prayer of Columbus,” for example, parts of which are inscribed in the wall of the District of Columbia’s Archives/Navy Memorial metro station, seems to have been inspired by his reading of an article in the Irish Republic.³ It has long been asserted, too, usually based on internal textual evidence, that Whitman was influenced by middle eastern spiritual writing; the Middlebury collection contains a fascinating set of annotations on Persian poetry that confirms and complicates that assertion, and that will do much to animate the story of American literature in deep time.
We also learn much about the poet’s life from his annotations as a corpus. Having never attended college, Whitman’s reading and his conversations with people, together with his visits to lyceums, the theatre, and the opera, constituted his education. If these documents, then, offer insight into the self-educative possibilities of urban nineteenth-century America, they also suggest how Whitman created himself both as a prose writer and editor—and then how he transformed himself to a poet. Floyd Stovall used Whitman’s marginalia to show, for example, that the poet’s shift in reading, from American journals in 1845-47 to British journals in 1848-49, tells us that...
Whitman was educating himself to become a poet in those latter years, reading literary criticism and accounts of the lives of poets.\textsuperscript{4}

Efforts at digitizing Whitman’s annotations are forced to reckon with the form—the sheer mass, as much as the difficulty—of the available evidence, as part of what that evidence means and its own history in scholarly accounts. Perhaps because Whitman’s methods of writing drew upon the form and content of his annotations and marginal notes, he held on to much of this material until the end of his life. Thanks to the fastidiousness (and bibliophilia) of his literary executors and friends, a large corpus of these kinds of texts survives. Yet the scholars cited so far, together with Kenneth M. Price, almost exhaust the list of those who have engaged Whitman’s annotations in any depth, largely because the materials are held in archives all across the United States, are difficult to understand without the broader context of similar documents, and have seen only limited publication.\textsuperscript{5}

This isn’t just about Whitman. In the broader field of literary studies, there are still surprisingly few projects that gather and display an author’s manuscript marginalia. Annotations made by writers in the margins of printed texts or images are crucial sources for analysis in literary,
philosophical, and historical study because they are rare direct evidence of interaction between a reader and his or her influences. Even given the (quite interesting) evidentiary difficulties of such interactions, discussed memorably by Cathy Davidson, for example, in her book *Revolution and the Word*, marginalia can demonstrate the range of influences on a writer, usually reaching far beyond the genres in which the annotator worked. In a famous marginal note, Whitman wrote that “all kinds of light reading, novels, newspapers, gossip, etc, serve as manure for the few great productions.” (And recall that manure is a positive term, for Whitman; his poem “This Compost” is a beautiful example, in which human beings themselves are the manure.) While a small number of influential scholarly studies in literature, history, and bibliography have emerged from the archival study of marginalia, such study has not penetrated the everyday methodologies of the humanities or social sciences in part because collections of annotations are available for comparatively few writers, such as Herman Melville and Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

Print editions, even simple transcriptions, of documents that combine printed text, marginalia, and images, are expensive; this cost may partly explain the paucity of published annotations collections. The powerful searching tools of a digital platform make such collections more accessible, while the availability of both images and transcriptions of texts solve some ergonomic challenges faced by print editions. Digital imaging and transcription of annotations has much to offer from a preservation standpoint too; marginalia are often at the unstable edges of pieces of paper, and are prone to fragmentation (see the edges of the scrapbook in fig. 9, for example); just as often, they are in the middle, and sometimes in pencil, and then they get blurred or rubbed out in handling.

While digital presentation of annotated documents has much to offer, in practice it is difficult to effect; the approach we will take to offering an interface for these documents reflects several important generic features of annotations and the possibilities of the digital platform for giving access to them. Annotations, after all, are a form of text markup, themselves a re-presentation or re-framing of an original text. They depend on more than their linguistic content to make meaning; it makes a difference where on the page a comment is made. The significance of spatiality in relating layers of information pushes markup based on the Text Encoding Initiative (TEI) standards to, and perhaps beyond, its descriptive limits. Take, for example, one of
Whitman’s annotations on a collection of periodical pages he cut out and assembled on top of an 1847 article on George Washington:

Represented in about a three-inch-square space in the middle of this document are challenges to several levels of scholarly digital editing—analytical, historical, technical, and bibliographical. First, if we think of annotations as a kind of old-fashioned “tagging,” this document exemplifies the
difficulties of capturing metadata with more metadata—the theme of Whitman’s markup here is the relationship between poets and their predecessors or between poets and their own reputations. Whitman has manipulated the physical properties of the elements of the collage in order to relate texts without necessarily unifying them. So the precise relationships of one paste-on to others, and to the commentary written on them or between them, are constitutive of how the document makes, or might make, meaning. With TEI-based XML it is easy to mark sections that have been underlined or otherwise grouped by a reader on a single piece of text. But the section here labeled “Poverty of Poets” by Whitman embraces three different pieces of paper, and presumably includes the marginal note “Roger” he has added to indicate which Bacon the text refers to—a note written in the margin relative to the annotated text, but not in a margin relative to the whole document.

Figure 11. Detail of “Characteristics of Shelley.” Trent Collection, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University.

That he has written over the underlying document in making that note suggests that we might treat the underlying article as insignificant, as “background” relative to encoding the “Poverty of Poets” section that covers it. But can we be absolutely certain that Whitman did not intend to let the words “uncovered requiem” peek through here? And even if Occam’s razor suggests Whitman’s pen-knife merely cut too close by chance, revealing those words, it should in principle be possible to allow them to appear in multiple hierarchies in our markup in order to encourage richer or more
robust interpretations. This is an old hang-up with structural markup, and there are various workarounds, but it is worth pointing out that the ontological situation of marginalia is that of the parallel hierarchy—of mutual dependence and of iterative consideration as conditions of reading such documents.

Annotations are made on images as well as printed texts; take, for example, Whitman’s notes on a phrenological chart.

The issues represented in the previous annotation are complicated here not only by the presence of an image in the hierarchy of meaning, but by the fact that the front clipping is pasted on only at its top: Whitman has positioned it so that it can be lifted and the emblematic map of the human brain underneath accessed. And even in the absence of markings by Whitman, there is the question of selection, ordering, excision (as I suggested earlier).
In this scrapbook, hundreds of pages long and currently in the collections at Ohio Wesleyan University (fig. 13), Whitman has sliced up a few geography textbooks, re-organized them by state and country, annotated them in some places, and added clippings from dozens of other sources. It’s not just geography, though: it’s cosmography, inasmuch as the history of the natural world, comparative ethnographies, and astronomical information are all included. Here is nineteenth-century “big data” analysis and visualization at work: torn from Emma Willard’s *Universal History*, ribbons of time and empire are eerily doubled by the strata of Whitman’s scrapbook itself, visible to the right.

Rather than thinking of Whitman as a thief, or as he might perhaps put it, a filterer, we might attend to the peculiar features of his information management strategies—relocating and marking up texts, grouping them, tagging, sifting and resifting, boiling down massive works like the atlas or multivolume histories of Long Island. Here Whitman is functioning as a literary historian, one who imagines that his own works will enter into and transform the flow of literary
history. Let me return to the document about phrenology (fig. 12) and the one about egotism (figs. 10-11) for a moment, as a prelude to, or perhaps as another version of, my concluding reflections on methodology in the digital humanities. In these documents, Whitman is remixing nineteenth-century print culture. More importantly, I think, he is re-shaping not just logics of nineteenth-century print genres (“high” and “low” literary magazines; “popular” and “serious” scientific publications) but also of disciplines, to his ends. Indeed, it is hard to separate the activities, analytically. Here phrenology, which posits the external expression of immanent and unchangeable characteristics or capacities, is overlaid with an account of literary history in an exercise in modifying the self, in making a Walt Whitman that could be numbered among the literary greats.

Figure 14. Whitman’s marginal notes on an 1845 article on egotism from Graham’s Magazine, Trent Collection, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University.
The same gesture happens in the many documents about egotism— in fig. 14 shows another one—Whitman annotated or collaged: in a typically nineteenth-century-U.S. sort of way, Whitman tells himself to take notice, reassuring himself that he can transform himself, become a different man, even as his survey of literary history insists on strong patterns, on the weight of time and the inertia of grand tendencies. This is Whitman trying to make a new author at the junction of a big data, transhistorical description, and a particular individual, annotating and reading closely. A good example are the poet’s comments on Milton inspired by reading part of the play Christopher under Canvas, by the Scottish writer John Wilson.
At a juncture in the play in which characters are performing a distant reading of the canon, singling out John Milton for praise, Whitman revolts (fig. 15). He zooms out to the global level in his final line of condemnation: “For instance what nations in Asia or Africa, not Christian, would see any great point in his poem if read to them”? At the top right of his comments on Milton, Whitman has tagged each page with a number (a circled “6” in fig. 15), something he did relatively commonly with his annotations, drafts, and proofs. This outburst has moved from the fragmentary and occasional mode of the marginal note to a more orderly part in an argument, without being remediated at the level of the physical support. Whitman masses and characterizes; he also particularizes, excerpts, brackets, excepts, moves, reframes.

Method

None of the methods I have just described, whether Whitman’s or the Whitman Archive’s, are or were new. They are configured interestingly and perhaps uniquely in their contexts, of reading and writing in the nineteenth-century United States, or of computational approaches to the humanities. We might say they are sometimes intermethodological. Whitman borrows methods from geography or phrenology and splices them with compositional methods for making poetry. Our digitization project involves creating facsimiles of documents, using standards-based scanning and storage techniques largely perfected in the libraries context, then paleography, then triple-checked transcription according to standard editorial guidelines, with XML encoding according to TEI norms modified by the peculiar bibliographic and intellectual-formal qualities of these documents. To identify and group them in the first place we used time-honored strategies in the humanities: bibliographic searching, formal interpretation in the larger context of Whitman’s documentary remains, and lots of arguing with each other. From a bibliographer’s perspective, the most important document we created was a hand list of all the annotations we could find, their locations, current titles, finding information, and so on—the most comprehensive such list made in the generations of editorial work on Whitman.

As I watch conversations about the digital humanities unfold, I sometimes wonder whether, or for how long, a project like this one might be described as a digital humanities project. If not, is it because in the long run (or even right now) there’s a sense that digital humanities projects ought to offer analytical, rather than archival, products? New interfaces and tools, not just
electronic facsimiles generated by updated techniques? These are communal questions, being answered right now in many different ways. But I do think the preservation of Whitman’s own tactics of deformation, annotation, gathering, and analyzing is an occasion to think a bit about the relationship between methodology and the “digital humanities,” commentators about which often valorize its contribution of new methods. The fact that we are starting to ask each other questions like, “Do you consider yourself a digital humanist?” signals the presence of the disciplinary, and that is an occasion to ponder.

I hope those becoming interested in practicing digital humanities will interrogate the urge for novelty, for the new, so carefully dissected by Lisa Gitelman, Bruno Latour, and others. Novelty rides not just on technologies, but on feelings, emotions, leanings, trendings, anxieties about relevance. It is very hard to come up with an actually new method, and that is just fine. New approaches are a little easier—combinations of methods, or of methods with theories, or with reading practices, or even of those with a particular means of problem formation or writing up one’s research. A new algorithm is not necessarily a new method; new software may be merely doing computationally what has been done by hand—methodically—for a long time. A new problem, or new formulation of an old problem, is at times the most powerful contribution a scholar can make in a given situation. This is not to say that the category of the new, or of novelty, is not useful or important. But we are at times quick to make it a standard of judgment, to dismiss the slow, the hard, the old. I get a strong Darwinian vibe from some digital humanities social media conversations, and at times—just at times—it feels less like a declaration of a new humanities and more like old-fashioned anxiety, perfectly reasonably cued by institutional instability in the humanities; by the disjunction between collaboration as an ideal and as a sanctioning force for the PhD or promotion; perhaps by a feeling of chagrin or accusedness, given the relatively high funding levels of digital humanities versus other humanistic areas at the moment; or by what Tom Scheinfeldt calls the “where’s the beef?” question, about what in fact digital humanities has done to change our understanding of human life past or present. Alan Liu calls this the “meaning problem” of digital humanities, asserting that “an understanding of the digital humanities can only rise to the level of an explanation if we see that the underlying issue is the disciplinary identity not of the digital humanities but of the humanities themselves.” For my part, when I consider the value of novelty, I like to think of our moment and its computational
affordances in terms of what Walt Whitman called “the new life of the new forms.” Life under the nominalization of the digital humanities…what would that be, most happily, most nurturingly? And forms, what might those look like, in a lively way? This is a slightly different way of saying, as Liu, Matthew Kirschenbaum, and many others lately have been, that the question of the disciplinarity of the “digital humanities” is a serious and complicated one.8

When I try to conceptualize what is happening in a field, or how a particular scholar’s work is positioning itself within, between, or beyond fields, I start with five categories. Most of these (though not as much the first) have been heavily theorized and historicized and fought-over (in battles I will not reenact here, but you will sense an extension of Michel Foucault, I suppose): approach, theory, discipline, method, and tool. Each of these has its own social sphere within and often beyond the academy. We operate in a quotidian way among the overlapping social spheres into which our combination of these elements places or guides us (and which we have only partly chosen ourselves). I don’t want to offer definitions of these terms, actually, though I suppose rough ones would be reasonably easy to posit, and each of my readers might have other categories. Rather, I want to suggest that those of us identifying as digital humanists, or using methods currently under that rubric, might consider the relationships among these terms—about what is related by these terms—when making claims about method or about the status, dimensions, or institutional future of “the digital humanities.” For “method,” says Agamben, “shares with logic its inability to separate itself completely from its context” (7). Don Waters, in a recent summa on the state of digital humanities, writes that under the broad umbrella of that term, “the tools and processes” that digital humanists “embrace and develop are mixed up in and not easily separated from the related intellectual pursuits. The further lesson,” Waters says, “is that there is no single set of so-called digital tools, but multiple sets aligned along broad methodological lines, and the vision of integrating them in a single environment or infrastructure cannot be achieved simply.”9 I would add that these tools and methods cannot be analytically separated from the sociology of professions: the being-in-DH as a person. Method and feelings go hand in hand as well, such that our feelings, whether they be strong passions or warm fuzzies or tinglings of shame, are analytical occasions. Waters does not talk about race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, or ethics in his overview; but these too are part of the weave of method and scholarly effects.10
In his short essay “Theory, Method, and Digital Humanities,” Scheinfeldt addresses the relationship between theory and method:

I believe . . . that we are entering a new phase of scholarship that will be dominated not by ideas, but once again [as in the early days of the history of science, his specialty] by organizing activities, both in terms of organizing knowledge, and organizing ourselves and our work. Our difficulty in answering “where’s the beef?” stems from the fact that, as digital humanities scholars, we traffic much less in new theories than in new methods. The new technology of the Internet has shifted the work of a rapidly growing number of scholars away from thinking big thoughts to forging new tools, methods, materials, techniques, and modes, or work which will enable us to harness the still unwieldy, but obviously game-changing, information technologies now sitting on our desktops and in our pockets. (emphasis added)¹¹

I couldn’t agree more with Scheinfeldt that, as he writes, “we need to make room for both kinds of digital humanities—the kind that seeks to make arguments and answer questions now, and the kind that builds tools and resources with questions in mind, but only in the back of its mind, and only for later.” But between these two quotations, method has slipped closer to tool, and a new tool is not the same thing as a new method. So I want to explore this a little bit more.

Wikipedia’s shifting definition of “digital humanities” suggests the uneasy place of the concept of methodology within it. As Kirschenbaum recorded it in his ADE Bulletin article on digital humanities in English departments in 2010, it went like this:

The digital humanities, also known as humanities computing, is a field of study, research, teaching, and invention concerned with the intersection of computing and the disciplines of the humanities. It is methodological by nature and interdisciplinary in scope. It involves investigation, analysis, synthesis and presentation of information in electronic form. It studies how these media affect the disciplines in which they are used, and what these disciplines have to contribute to our knowledge of computing.¹²

As it stood on December 3, 2013, it went like this, with an important downgrading of method to accompany a downgrading of institutional gravity from “field” to “area”:

The Digital Humanities are an area of research, teaching, and creation concerned with the intersection of computing and the disciplines of the humanities. Developing from the field
of humanities computing, digital humanities embrace a variety of topics, from curating online collections to data mining large cultural data sets. Digital humanities . . . currently incorporate both digitized and born-digital materials and combine the methodologies from traditional humanities disciplines (such as history, philosophy, linguistics, literature, art, archaeology, music, and cultural studies) and social sciences with tools provided by computing (such as data visualisation, information retrieval, data mining, statistics, text mining) and digital publishing.13

Today this definition is similar, though last time I checked the term “digital humanities praxis” had sneaked into the foundations. (Wikipedia or not, maybe definitions are really just layered hacks.)

“At its core,” Kirschenbaum concluded in 2010, “digital humanities is more akin to a common methodological outlook than an investment in any one specific set of texts or even technologies.” That subtle formulation, methodological outlook, is important, I think. An outlook is an interesting thing in which to base an intellectual formation—or rather, perhaps it is a profoundly common thing in which to base an intellectual formation, it’s just uncommon to declare it as such. To be grounded only in method does not seem to satisfy the demands of scholarship, which asks for comparison, interpretation, argument. The shift from method to methodological outlook may then be regarded as salutary, both because it invites a range of participants and perspectives and because it qualifies the centrality of method. But then again: the New Critics had a common methodology, with close reading at its heart, but perhaps more importantly had a more or less shared methodological outlook. That outlook today is often critiqued for its non-interdisciplinarity, its depoliticizing of literature, and its failure to historicize. There are, we might then say, virtues and potential hazards to linking a label like “digital humanities” or “literary criticism” to a common methodological outlook. In literary studies, the recent revisitation of the practices and circumstances of the New Critics (by Chris Castiglia, Jay Grossman, and Bradley King among others) is provocative in this context; one wonders if such a reconsideration owes something not just to the turn away from theory and poststructuralism but to the intensity with which our techniques of study are being mulled over in the field at large.14

Mark Sample writes that “The heart of the digital humanities is not the production of knowledge. It’s the reproduction of knowledge.” “The promise of the digital is not in the way it allows us to ask new questions because of digital tools or because of new methodologies made possible by
those tools,” he goes on, but “in the way the digital reshapes the representation, sharing, and
discussion of knowledge.” While I am inclined to agree with Sample much of the time, and while
I certainly have been arguing here for an appreciation of the ancientness of many of our
methodologies despite the newness of our apparatuses and techniques, I still want to tweak the
metaphor of the heart, the impulse to establish norms, standards, edges, edginesses, the smart
through its contrast the boring or repetitive or passé. Imagining a computational humanities with
maximum latitude, with a past, and with the past’s claims still upon it, is, I think, a powerful way
to guide the transformation of the humanities more generally.

“Tomorrow’s historian will have to be able to programme a computer to survive.”
Programming hasn’t yet arrived in the general requirements for the history PhD (though it’s worth
noting that “tomorrow,” for this social historian of the longue durée, might have meant “within a
few hundred years”). Still, we are not exactly repeating the scholarly concerns of the moment in
which Ladurie uttered the statement I have taken as my epigraph: at that time, in the late 1960s
and early 1970s, an increasing use of computational techniques by historians was one part of a
larger shift from an approach to history that emphasized the unity of spirit, repeated in a series of
historical moments, to history as a series of more fundamental shifts, transformations, or breaks.
Here in the States anyway, it’s not usually the computational enactments of that new
historiography that we still use to teach our students to conceptualize power and history, but those
of historians like Michel de Certeau and Foucault—yet Certeau’s and Foucault’s capacity to
reformulate historiographic visions and vocabularies surely owes something to the methodological
ecology of that moment in the history of history writing. Perhaps we might take, then, the new as
a concept and indeed a feeling that budding digital humanists should interrogate, both out there in
the public world of digital humanities work and in here, in the soul and our reactions to things.
Magnificent innovations in method often come from trying to answer very old questions.
Magnificent new questions often emerge from the application of very old methods.

Whitman’s marginalia can be considered a material expression of his intermethodological
approach, blending scientific and geographic forms of study with poetic compositional methods.
The distinction between Whitman’s techniques of annotation and his methods of composition is
important to draw because it tells us something about how material practice (about boundaries
between things) can be used to reorganize conceptual expectations (boundaries among concepts).
And that is an important point of reflection for digital humanities practitioners today. Method links outlook with material practice; attention to method as newness can obscure attention to both material practices and shared outlooks, often ancient shared outlooks. In Walt Whitman’s marginalia we watch a person dismantle and re-form the knowledge of his time. We witness a method that cannot be described in terms confined by interpretations of his poetry, or his own statements to his biographer or interviewers about his practices, or by our own definitions of marginalia. He is abandoning traditional analyses of power and of dominant literary institutions, and thinking about the form of a literary life in terms of its practices, in documents hacked, mixed, erased, marked, and re-marked. Still, this practice did not yield in Whitman a full-scale embrace of what we would call anti-racism, or of Native American self-determination, or of a public formulation of what we would today call his queerness. The marginalia show Whitman’s contradictions, and the weaving of his methods with his human places and times. In turn, in editing his marginalia into digital surrogates, we re-enact this reformation, a new weaving, with new places and times. I feel that we can learn something from Whitman’s methodological recombinatory restlessness, that capacity for elaboration, and those contradictions, in the larger framework of the long history of gathering and interpreting in which our computational practices take a part.
NOTES

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3 Library of Congress card 720, Detroit Catalog # 32.


Alan Liu’s essay in the *Debates in the Digital Humanities* on the rareness of cultural critique in digital humanities work is an important example of the call for this, as is the work of Lisa Nakamura, Kimberly Christen, and a number of young scholars working from postcolonialist backgrounds. I also wonder if digital humanities is thriving in part as a reaction to the embrace of race and, more broadly, identity and expressly politics-based scholarship, and the institutional power of those formations. Of course lots of digital humanities work is political, but it’s neither a pillar of being in the field nor are its politics necessarily attached to identity—racial, sexual—as such. It may be that the particular kinds of formalism possible in computational humanities work provide important intellectual-ecological niches. But it does seem to me to be a good idea to continue to bring to digital humanities problem formation the concerns with systematic equality that race, gender, and queer studies make methodologically central and important as scholarly outcomes. See Alan Liu, “Where Is Cultural Criticism in the Digital Humanities?” in *Debates in the Digital Humanities*, ed. Matthew K. Gold (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012): 490-509.

Daniel J. Cohen and Tom Scheinfeldt, eds., *Hacking the Academy: New Approaches to Scholarship and Teaching from Digital Humanities* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013) <http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/dh.12172434.0001.001>. Scheinfeldt’s notion of a post-theoretical humanities strikes me as overinformed by his work in the history of science. Theory is no less a set of social conversations than it is an approach; not every theory is universal, and not every theoretical advance is framed as a paradigm shift. And indeed, we may require both a theoretical frame of mind and a historical knowledge of methodology in order to discern the meaning of universities’ collective investment in big data and the computational turn. See Gary Hall, “Toward a Postdigital Humanities,” *American Literature* 85.4 (2013): 781-809.


Matt Wilkens’s excellent step forward in thinking about geography and American literature offers a compact example: “To reduce errors and to narrow the results for human review, only those named-location strings that occurred at least five times in the corpus and were used by at least two different authors were accepted. The remaining unique strings were reviewed by hand against their context in each source volume. Those that were rarely used as named locations (“Charlotte” is almost always a personal name; “Providence” is used nearly exclusively to mean “divine care”) or were hopelessly ambiguous across volumes (“North River,” “Mapleton”) were discarded.” Wilkens, “The Geographic Imagination of Civil War-Era American Fiction,” *American Literary History* (Winter 2013) 25.4: 803-840.

The difficulty with such purging is that by eliminating low-repetition instances, one of the most important potentials of mass modeling for the humanities, specifically, is diminished: its capacity to identify outliers, the unexpected, the surprising, the remnant, the lone survivor. This is much to the point in the case of 1) a war which destroyed many small towns in the South, wiping them off postbellum maps and 2) a literary historical commonplace of today, which says that regional writing was all about entertaining urban audiences. Discarding the ambiguous is, well, discarding that which lies most at the heart of literary investigation in the modern era. As we move forward, it might be worth finding ways to include the ambiguous in a new, partly conceptual, map, to promote computational means of suggesting new areas of investigation or surprise from within the chaos of the data set, rather than despite it.


Indian” trope, offering a fantasy of a “secure” or pure future that has yet to arrive? What is a healthy relationship to prediction for the humanities, particularly as computational humanities techniques born in the prophetic crucible of the numerical sciences make their homes in a humanities increasingly fearful that its tendency to look backwards is a liability in the age of “austerity measures”?