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"Response to Critical Infrastructure Panel"

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The following is a response delivered at the end of the [Critical Infrastructure Studies Panel](#), which took place at the January [2018 Modern Language Association Conference](#) in New York City. Panelists included [Tung-Hui Hu](#), [Shannon Mattern](#), [Tara McPherson](#), and [James Smithies](#). [Alan Liu](#) and I co-organized the session.

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Susan Leigh Star [has made the foundational point](#) that while we often think of infrastructure as a set of mute base layers underlying the systems we use -- a group of water pipes, a rack of computer servers, a set of asphalt roads -- one person's invisible infrastructure is another person's active focus of time, interest, and investment; as she puts it, "for a railroad engineer, the rails are not infrastructure but topic" (380). Our approach to infrastructure must therefore foreground perspective and acknowledge that infrastructure is fundamentally relational and embedded in a net of human activities and concerns.

The papers we've just heard make visible a set of embedded human relations around infrastructure in varying ways. Shannon Mattern's claim that the spaces in which we store and access information mediate our understanding of that information calls attention not just to the shelves, cubbies, cases, and libraries in which we store our work, but also to the human beings designing and accessing those structures. Tung-Hui Hu, by focusing on the affective dimensions of big data, approaches the topic of infrastructure through a perspective that considers the effects it lodges in our bodies, feelings, and minds. Tara McPherson explores how social platforms can act as infrastructures that facilitate or impede the machinations of hate groups. And James Smithies points out that one key role critical infrastructure studies can play is to call attention to the scholarly infrastructures that surround us and how our own research practices intersect with them.

As we think about what to make of these perspectives and what the implications of critical infrastructure studies might be, we might turn back to Alan Liu's signal call for this work. In his blog post "[Drafts for *Against the Cultural Singularity*](#)," taken from an in-progress book, Liu writes that infrastructure offers digital humanities practitioners a key critical possibility, a space within which DHers can "treat infrastructure . . . as a tactical medium that opens the possibility of critical infrastructure studies as a mode of cultural studies."

For Liu, critical infrastructure studies offers a way for DH practitioners to embrace a critical form of building, one that focuses locally on the creation of scholarly infrastructures in higher education but that can, over time, share the values and practices

of the academy with other areas of culture such as "business, law, medicine, government, the media, the creative industries, and NGOs."

In my brief response today, I want to point out that by pairing critical infrastructure studies with ongoing work in DH and, importantly, with emerging work in the area of critical university studies, as Matt Applegate did the other morning here at the convention and as Erin Glass has been working on in her dissertation on the subject, we have a chance to right our own ship and to enact a form of resistance to capital within higher education that is part of the shift we'd like to see in the larger culture.

To locate this proposition within a concrete set of scholarly infrastructure initiatives, I want to talk about two related projects: the CUNY Academic Commons and the Humanities Commons.

The CUNY Academic Commons is an open-source, faculty-led academic social network established in 2009 for the 24-campus CUNY system. Built on WordPress and BuddyPress, the Commons is used for courses, faculty profiles, publications, CVs, research interest groups, and experiments. It began with no funding, but slowly gained internal funding and now is securely supported on an annual basis by the CUNY Office of Academic Affairs. In 2012, with the help of a grant from the Sloan Foundation, we released the Commons In A Box, a free software project which can be used by any institution to get a Commons site up and running, and next year, with the help of the NEH, we will be releasing the Commons In A Box OpenLab, which will help institutions set up a Commons-based teaching platform.

Soon after we released CBOX, we met with Kathleen Fitzpatrick and her team at the MLA, which soon used CBOX to create first the MLA Commons to link members of the organization, then the Humanities Commons to link members of multiple scholarly organizations, and finally Humanities CORE, an institutional repository tied to the Humanities Commons that helps academics share their scholarship, research data, and syllabi.

Examined through a perspective that combines work in DH, critical infrastructure studies, and critical university studies, we can see that these platforms have helped establish what Christopher Kelty calls "recursive publics," having been taken up by the communities that they were built for, and that built them. And we can see that the flourishing of these platforms represents an intervention in the enterprise-level IT purchasing practices that determine much of the technology we use in the academy. Efforts like the CUNY Academic Commons and Humanities Commons may seem in some ways small and homegrown, especially when compared to the large sums of money our universities spend on Elsevier subscriptions, but they can have large knock-on effects. The Humanities Commons, for instance, is slowly but surely helping scholars move away from what I would call the academic vulture economy -- for instance, proprietary, for-profit, corporate platforms such as Academia.edu that monetize the academic content deposited on them. And, in the wake of New York State giving 4 million dollars to the CUNY system to develop zero-cost courses and open educational resources, the CUNY

Academic Commons is beginning to displace corporate OER platforms to become a pedagogical infrastructure that CUNY faculty can use to create, share, and teach with OER materials.

Coming back to Susan Leigh Star, then, and foregrounding the embeddedness of human relations around infrastructure, I want to suggest that the call for critical infrastructure studies can ultimately help us mobilize a critically informed resistance to capital and set of building practices that move the scholarly communications infrastructure of the academy away from corporations and towards the faculty, staff, and students who can build, care for, maintain, and use them.

Works Cited

Kelty, Christopher M. *Two Bits: The Cultural Significance of Free Software*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008.

Star, Susan Leigh. "The Ethnography of Infrastructure." *American Behavioral Scientist*. 43: 377-391, 1999.