

**The Nonhumanities, or, *ceci n'est pas une critique*
Review¹ of *Hacking the Academy: New Approaches to
Scholarship and Teaching from Digital Humanities*, eds.
Daniel J. Cohen and Tom Scheinfeldt, Ann Arbor: The
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Hacking is about doing: creating, thinking, questioning, observing, learning, and teaching. The core of academic work is, at its heart, hacking. The scholar-hacker takes this and runs with it; breaking open previous modes of thought to see how they tick, rearranging them, adding to them, and then taping, soldering, and gluing them back together again. (153)

Whatever happened to the idea of ‘hacking the academy’? Hacking the academy was a call to arms, mostly by people working in the so-called ‘digital humanities’, to, presumably, get rid of the stuffiness of the ‘traditional’ humanities and motivate scholars averse to technocultural progress to change their outdated habits. It was also a plea for the humanities to stop its navel-gazing, ivory-towering and to ‘reach out’ to the ‘general user’ and the world ‘out there’, but also, and especially, to the sciences. Indeed, and in short, it was a wake-up call to avoid complete looming ‘irrelevance’. The idea was that, by ‘hacking’ it, the academy would be forced to open up towards a wider public, to rethink its exclusive practices, to embrace the new cultural, technological and, most importantly, economic (i.e. neoliberal) ‘climate’ and, basically, move into the 21st century. All very noble and no doubt necessary calls to action, one cannot but agree with... so what happened?

Before I start to go back in time, maybe I should declare what you might call a ‘non-interest’. Usually, people declare the opposite. They declare an interest in the subject they are analysing and presenting as noteworthy. Usually they care about what they write and advocate. Usually there is some promotional campaign running in the background when people write in defence of something or call for change. They want to fix problems or show that the fix proposed is not the right one. And in some cases, there simply is no problem – so, if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it. What would you say, however, if I told you that I am not interested in the Humanities and their survival – digital or not? What if I told you that I believe that academia is dead, together with the institution that has been giving it shelter (i.e. the ‘university’). What you see today and what you live (if you still are fortunate or unfortunate enough to work as an academic) bears no resemblance to its ‘idea’ (a very Platonic view and Newmanian notion). It is merely its zombie other, it barely ‘survives’. Maybe you have to leave academia before you can

¹ May the reader be warned: this is not a book review, at least in the traditional sense of the term. It is also written in a style that some might object to and which the author would characterize as ‘post-academic’.

really see it for what it is and for what it has become (even though virtually everyone I know who is still working inside it is complaining about it all the time). Only from outside I guess can you really see that it is probably beyond repair. Worse, everything you do to prolong its agony or to hope for its revival may play into the hands of the very people and the system who are responsible for what it has become. No need to worry, though; my stance here will be neither ‘nostalgic’ nor ‘nihilistic’ – I am no Stoner² wishing myself back to the good old days of a humanist academy (although critically reviewing what happened to him and what was lost, already in his time, and whether those kind of humanities ever really existed would probably be quite illuminating). I am also not saying that everything that happens or has been happening in and to the humanities is basically irrelevant to the large majority of humans (and nonhumans) in the past, present or future. It is probably relevant, maybe even very much so, but that will not matter much anymore. And it is not just a question of ‘failed communication strategies’, ‘pitch’, a lack of ‘outreach’ or whatever you want to call it. Basically, and this is my modest but at the same time quite drastic and maybe ‘radical’ claim: what the humanities have lost – again, as I said, digital or not – is their ‘subject’. I will explain what I mean by that term as I go along.

So, back to the question: what happened to the idea of ‘hacking the academy’? The editors of this issue asked me to go back to Daniel J. Cohen and Tom Scheinfeldt’s volume (published in 2013) which, in turn, started with a blog initiative launched in 2010. The instruction was not to write a straightforward book review – a genre that is very much threatened with extinction should the academy one day be seriously ‘hacked’, by the way. It takes several years (at least in the humanities) before ‘new information’ reaches the ‘reading subject’ in the format of a ‘book’ (a journal, like *Word and Text*, is slightly better; it probably has a turnaround of one year from inception to publication of an issue). Nevertheless, I was asked to do a ‘retrospection’, within the context and frame of ‘The New Humanities in the ‘Post-University’ of course. Unfortunately, as you will have noticed already, while I share the idea that the idea (bear with me) that the Humanities are in crisis is ‘hackneyed’, as the call for paper says, I just cannot work up enough ‘positivity’ to foresee much of a role for the humanities (or indeed the posthumanities) in what is still called ‘University’ in the 21st century or even a ‘Postuniversity’ for that matter.

In *Hacking the Academy: New Approaches to Scholarship and Teaching from the Digital Humanities* (2013), the editors explain the ‘provocation’ that eventually led to the volume, when they posted (on May 21, 2010) the following:

Can an algorithm edit a journal? Can a library exist without books? Can students build and manage their own learning management platforms? Can a conference be held without a program? Can Twitter replace a scholarly society? (3)

The idea was to ‘collectively produce a volume that would explore how the academy might be beneficially reformed using digital media and technology’ (3). Out of the more than 300 submissions received within a week the editors selected around 30 short pieces to reflect the ‘vibrancy and intensity’ (4) with which ‘scores of engaged academics who care deeply about higher education are trying to further its original goals of learning, scholarship, and service, albeit in novel ways that may be uncomfortable for

² *Stoner* is an academic or campus novel written by the American writer John Williams in 1965.

those with a more conservative bent' (4). The main points of outcome (which, it has to be said, were already quite predictably standard ten years ago) were:

- the need for open access to scholarship;
- new modes of engaging students in the classroom with digital media;
- the move past the stagnation of the lecture into deeper, more collaborative – and ultimately, more effective – pedagogical practice. (4)

To take these in turn: the book is of course 'self-aware' of the (self-)contradiction that it is using the traditional form of a scholarly collection in book form to make an argument for new forms of scholarship and dissemination. By the way, it is as such also not quite 'open access' in that it is still behind the paywall of the University of Michigan Press even though its 'Creative Commons' licence allows you to read the contributions online. But the idea of the book just being one (temporary) freeze frame so to speak of all the contributions that were sent to the initial blog (hackingtheacademy.org) is somewhat scuppered by the fact that the site no longer seems to work. On a number of attempted visits while writing this text I received the following error message: 'Forbidden – You don't have permission to access...', which does not bode well for the longevity and sustainability of a venture that once claimed: 'If the book is static, the overall project is anything but' (5).

When *Hacking the Academy* was conceived, between 2010 and 2013, the world and the humanities were a different place. Let us start with the notion of 'hacking' as such, which has lost much of its romantic, rebel and radical appeal since the 2000s when it was still surfing on the afterglow of the 'hacker as hero' image in cyberpunk and the figure of Neo, he's the One, hacker messiah in *The Matrix* (1999). True, Tad Suiter tries to differentiate hacking from the mundane practice of 'cracking' (i.e. hacking security systems, mostly for less 'noble' reasons than exposing a potential weakness) and refigures the hacker as an 'autodidact' in the vein of a Situationist '*détournement*' and '*bricolage*' (8), who is engaged in a 'playful creation to enrich knowledge of complex systems' (8). However, this 'hacker ethos' is something that is lost to most people today, in the time of 'infoterror' and 'cyberwar' with their collateral damage to personal lives in terms of identity theft, ubiquitous online surveillance and hate speech on social media, not to mention the new vulnerabilities of economic and social (critical) infrastructure to online espionage, with the resulting autoimmunitarian cranking up of online 'Homeland' security defences. In a time when everyone apparently can be a hacker, the 'ethos' of hacktivism sort of goes (see for example a very 'autodidactic' do-it-yourself hacker site like 'Hacker One': <https://www.hackerone.com/start-hacking>, where the hacker becomes the new security expert – and where disruption pays... for some).

Why did it seem to make sense to want to 'hack' the academy at the time? Well, in order to help the academy cope with technology and, more precisely, with the 'integration of new media into the very fabric of classroom interaction' (9). Which basically means, teaching through electronic whiteboards, I presume (we have all tried that I guess), or connecting the classroom to the internet (which today, of course, happens in a 'decentralised' and often uncontrolled, rather 'disruptive' way through students' mobile devices), through practices like 'flipped classrooms', and at least since COVID-19, through platforms like Zoom, i.e. no (physical) classrooms at all. When two 'highly complex systems – computer technology and the academy, one complex by nature, and one deeply complex by force of history' – collide, they are bound to 'hybridize', as Sluiter explains (9). Hybridization, it is useful to remind ourselves, is not

a public good as such (and this is by no means a right-wing argument for some strange idea of ‘purity’, but some hybridizations are better resisted) and the hope that ‘all we can do is steer it [i.e. hybridization] by getting out there and learning more by creative experimentation’ (9) might either be somewhat pious or rather defeatist:

There’s a lot to be bleak about when you look to the future of higher education. The academic job market is grim. The publishing system seems on the verge of economic collapse. Universities are quickly becoming prohibitively expensive for the vast majority of students, who are in turn forced into an exploitative system of student loans. The system, to some of us, appears to be broken. (9)

And that was written in 2010! A few funding decreases for the humanities later plus the impact of COVID-19, this assault on the university, today, seems to be going into its final and decisive phase.

‘But when a system fails, you hack around it’ – Sluiter’s advice, putting all his money on the idea that the ‘hacker ethos, in the end, might save us’ (Heidegger had similar ideas, which even though they involved a ‘God’ saving us from ‘our’ technology, sounds comparatively realistic today), ‘or at least prolong the life of the academy as we know it’. But the real bottom line at the time seemed to be that hacking is ‘fun’ (and is ‘good for the intellect’ (10)). Maybe. But what if the ‘system’ itself is hacking (itself) and thrives on it? What if it hacks ‘us’ (the ‘human’) rather than we it? What if the humanities have ‘outgrown’ the human and are now being used against ‘us’? Under these circumstances any hybridizing might only play into the ‘system’s’ hands.

The jeremiad of the crisis or death of the humanities and the university is a genre with a long history and laws of its own. To cite just briefly some examples that fall into the period of *Hacking the Academy* Terry Eagleton’s oft-cited 2010 piece in *The Guardian* on ‘The Death of Universities’ that starts from the assumption that ‘the humanities should constitute the core of any university worth the name’. So, since the ‘humanities are about to disappear from our universities’, the university as an ‘idea’ (especially as a ‘centre of critique’) is dead. A ‘critical reflection on human values and principles should be central to everything that goes on in universities, not just to the study of Rembrandt or Rimbaud’, but the ‘corporate’ university and ‘advanced capitalism’ has no time and no use for critique.³ One should probably add that 2010 is also a turning point because of the UK government’s decision to withdraw funding from the Humanities and, instead, focus exclusively on STEM subjects.

In *The New York Review of Books* Simon Head refers to the ‘grim threat to British Universities’ that is coming under the intellectual rule of ‘(American) business management consulting’ and the imposition of its ‘quality control regime’ with its ‘audit culture’, ‘benchmarking’ and ‘micromanagement of research’, ‘short termism’, with an understanding of teaching as ‘client service’ and its increasing reliance on a ‘contingent academic workforce’ to perform all these.⁴ Alex Preston, in *The Guardian*, writes of ‘[t]he war against the humanities at Britain’s universities’, their chronic underfunding and the political privileging of the sciences: ‘Higher education is stuffed with overpaid

³ Terry Eagleton, ‘The Death of Universities’, *The Guardian online*, 17 December 2010; available at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/dec/17/death-universities-malaise-tuition-fees> [accessed 15 July 2020].

⁴ See Simon Head, ‘The Grim Threat to British Universities’, *The New York Review of Books*, 13 January 2011: 58-64.

administrators squeezing every ounce of efficiency out of lecturers and focusing on the “profitable” areas of science, technology, engineering and maths. Are the humanities at risk of being wiped out?’⁵

Closer to the present, ‘The New Assault on Universities: A Manifesto for Resistance in Covid Times’ speaks of the ‘risk of collapse’ of UK higher education and the looming threat of bankruptcy for many universities. The UK, the manifesto says, ‘comes bottom of OECD countries in relation to the proportion of public spending as part of overall spending on tertiary education’.⁶ Thus, together with a hard Brexit looking ever more likely, the days of the much vaunted ‘world class’ education system that has been punching way above its weight for the last few decades might be counted.

A closer look at the more detailed ‘hacking’ agenda in *Hacking the Academy* shows that as an academic practice hacking should have been applied to a number of aspects: namely scholarship, teaching and institutions. What figured most prominently under practices of scholarship was the switch to ‘open access’. It is true, why indeed should academics do work for free for multinational corporations like Springer, Elsevier or Wiley when they can build ‘a different, more accessible, and progressive system of scholarly communication’ (13), while the institution they are paid by has to pay once again to provide access to that work for their students? Incidentally, as long as universities, and the humanities in particular, were still mostly funded by the ‘taxpayer’, this would have been an even greater outrage. But the argument that people in publicly-funded institutions should not make the taxpayer pay twice for the knowledge they produce, in the time of the corporate university and paying student-customers, unfortunately no longer warrants that argument. For the academic employee, however, to ‘get out of business’ (i.e. the publishing business), as Jason Baird Jackson suggests, very literally means, especially for young academics who are often in very precarious and part time employment, *being* out of business if they are not seen to be publishing in peer-reviewed, high-impact academic journals or respectable ‘international’ publishers. Thus, Daniel J. Cohen’s statement, ‘If you’re publishing primarily for careerist reasons and don’t deeply care about your subject matter, I recommend you find another career’ (40) should, already then, have sounded as arrogant as it is disingenuous.

What in fact mostly happens if you embrace the ‘hacker ethos’ is that there is not so much a shift to embracing ‘new modes of scholarships enabled by web-based communication’ (15) but rather that you enter a second, parallel universe, where you create an online academic avatar and simply add another tier of work on top of your ‘normal’, institutionally required work. No wonder academic stress levels are what they are if remaining ‘relevant’ means not only going on doing your academic day job but next to that also finding new ways of reaching out, disseminating and speaking to a very fickle online ‘community’ via social media, all the while vying for attention with billions of other people, most of whom believe they are researchers, experts, artists, influencers etc. themselves. Books can no longer compete with ‘the net’, where knowledge is really understood as ‘information’ that can simply be gained by ‘navigating, creating, participating’ (16). David Parry’s to-do list for academics willing

⁵ Alex Preston, ‘The War against Humanities at Britain’s Universities’, *The Guardian online*, 29 March 2015; available at <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2015/mar/29/war-against-humanities-at-britains-universities> [accessed 15 July 2020].

⁶ This is an online petition and update on Michael Bailey and Des Freedman’s, *The Assault on Universities: A Manifesto for Resistance* (London: Pluto Press, 2011); available at <https://www.plutobooks.com/blog/a-new-assault-on-universities/> [accessed 7 September 2020].

to ‘burn the boats/books’ is, predictably, all about the new information economy of reaching out, showcasing and curating one’s self and one’s work: stop publishing in closed systems; self-publish; present ideas and work in progress; produce digital publications interacting with the web; get over peer-review; aspire to be a curator; and think beyond the book (17-18). However, it also sounds more and more predictably and ideologically hollow. If hacking the academy is all about increasing visibility through search algorithms, digital layout, netiquette and so on, in the time of an ever-diminishing attention span that nobody is daring to try and ‘stretch’, the humanities have already lost their place in the ‘attention economy’.⁷

Few people will deny the need for venerable instruments like academic journals and peer-review to change and adapt – the level of bureaucracy and the sheer stupidity of more and more automated peer-review systems and their autocratic feedback practices and streamlined revision requirements will have frustrated most academics. I, for one, have withdrawn a number of submissions from journals that were unable to accommodate any queries as to what a specific reviewer actually meant by their suggested changes; or simply because it was not possible to talk to a ‘human’ editor at any stage of this process at all. In most cases of conflicting reviews it now seems common practice that an editor (or the automated process that replaces him or her) either issues a rejection or calls for a third reviewer. How this third ‘independent’ reviewer is supposed to ‘moderate’ between two diametrically opposed reviews and make an ‘informed’ decision is anybody’s guess. However, simply understanding journals as ‘curators of the noise of the web’, and their websites as ‘collective, tagging entities’, as Jo Guldi suggests (20-21), would certainly contribute to the further decline (both quantitative and qualitative) in ‘scholarly journals’. The idea of turning journals into glorified ‘blogs’ by opening them up to all sorts of formats of contributions, subject to open-ended revision, certainly facilitates a ‘grand conversation’ but also pre-empts aspects about scholarly exchange that are more critical (i.e. beyond mere polemic or diversity of opinion). No wonder journal editors are increasingly inclined to ‘outsource’ the ‘burdens of editing and curation’ (23) and subject contributions to ‘wiki conversation’ (24). It would be terribly unpopular to show some edge and take a stance that goes beyond an ‘opinion’, or self-promotion and a journal’s ‘USP’ (i.e. its ‘identity’ or ‘unique selling point’ in corporate publishing speak). You might indeed as well run a blog instead of a journal, and there are indeed very good and informative blogs by academics. You can follow their updates on Twitter or Facebook. They often lead to the more ‘academic’ work that these people are (also) doing. The question is how seriously will internet readers be taking this and how many opinion pieces and teasers can one meaningfully engage with, instead of reading the ‘real thing’, i.e. the text that authors have sat down to complete, in the sense of thought through and brought to at least a temporary conclusion?

I am evidently not against ‘sharing my research’ or even showing ‘work in progress’ – all of my publications and projects in one form or another have been available on my personal webpage for years, even though not many people have taken up the ‘free offer’, because one has to actively look to find these documents. However, the ‘ad hoc’ nature of these online offerings usually gives them more of a ‘note to self’ character, i.e. the function as a reminder of what I have done and where I might be

⁷ On ‘attention, retention and protention’, see Victor Petit, ‘Vocabulaire d’Ars Industrialis’, in *Pharmacologie du Front National, suivi du Vocabulaire d’Ars industrialis*, eds. Bernard Stiegler, and Victor Petit (Paris: Flammarion, 2013), 380-2.

going with this (this is of course also true of many of the pieces on platforms like researchgate or academia.edu). My hunch is that most blogs actually work like that, only that we now share our 'to-do-lists' with people we do not know and probably (maybe even, hopefully) will never meet. The fact that 'Anyone can publish anything online... means that a lot of dreck appears', as Mills Kelly concedes (53), but 'the fact that dreck is scattered all over the Internet does not mean that quality work cannot also appear through the same process'. Very true, but let me spell out the rather self-defeating logic here: to counter the fear of 'becoming irrelevant' we should delve into the 'dreck' to try and make the Internet better? That sounds – apart from desperate – more like trolling than hacking to me. It seems that you have been living two lives, Mr Anderson...

On to the next point on the hacking agenda: teaching. Currently, in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers and students across the world and of all ages and levels are experiencing what digital education really looks like. Judging from the general feedback, the verdict seems to be mostly quite sobering. If this is all online learning can provide – disaffected students, multi-tasking parents and overburdened teachers – then one might be able to predict a certain nostalgia for the actual classroom and the physicality of human-based teaching. Indeed, most national education systems seem eager to return to at least a partial presence-based model (if it is only to counter the terrible effects that online teaching has on disengaged students who also mostly 'happen to be' the socially and cognitively challenged ones; it may also be motivated by political and funding issues related to student visa awarded on the basis of physical presence). However, the social distancing rules will make it impossible to return to physical 'normality' any time soon. The 'new' normality even after the pandemic eventually subsides might very well look like a mixed virtual-actual learning environment with all the infrastructural, social and economic implications that might have for student-teacher interaction, learning practices and the future role (and number) of teachers and their training. All this makes Gideon Burton's address (63-5) in *Hacking the Academy* sound rather hollow, when he enthusiastically calls out to the 'Dear Students' to remind them 'what a fantastic time [it is] to be alive' (64), when 'modes of creative expression are being opened to your generation that none have known before' (64). An optimistic can-do attitude or frame of mind often helps but creativity is usually something that is earned through hard work of analysis and differentiation (i.e. learning), except for rare cases of 'genius' (to be defined). I suggest you ask today's students what they have to say about the 'reality check no. 1: The Digital World is Your Home Campus', now that the majority of them are not allowed onto their physical university campus anymore. Many will find it marvellous – for a while – until they are asked to hand in their essays and their tutor can only allocate a 15-minute slot to discuss with them online. Burton's parting shot, 'Cyberspace is already more real to you than the physical space of your college campus – and it is becoming so for your future employers' (65), to an increasing number of young people (not speaking of their teachers) today, might sound more like a threat than a promise. Be careful what you wish for...

That 'lectures are bullshit' (66) is something that many today would gladly underwrite (even though the Internet is full of recorded lectures – precisely all the ones the average student does not benefit from in their physical institutions anymore). However, there is something to be said for the lecture format in a time when listening to someone speak without interruption and distraction for an hour or so becomes a 'new'

and rather important ‘transferrable skill’. More involvement for students in their education is a very important and a worthy undertaking, however, it is just such a shame that it continues to happen in the form of ‘stakeholdership’ and ‘social media disinhibition’. And I am almost sure that Jeff Jarvis today deeply regrets the enthusiasm of what sounded like a provocative statement at the time (i.e. before ‘attention’ in Stiegler’s sense (see above) became a critical issue in digital studies): ‘In the Google age, what is the point of teaching memorization’ (68), when remembering and critical tradition are the main business of the humanities and the brightest students are (still) the ones who can link new to established knowledge. In a ‘glorious’ age where information is no longer hard to find and where ‘information can find us’ (72), what if you do not want to be found by it – e.g. when you need time to think? Information obesity is notoriously bad for the kind of ‘knowledge-ability’ Michael Wesch, another digital enthusiast in the volume, is looking for in the ‘networked information environment’ (73).

We would probably never be able to agree on what an effective educator is, what educational ‘methods’ are preferable and so on, but in my view, technology under no circumstances can replace (good) teaching. The best lessons I experienced as a student and as a teacher were all person-centred and did not have much to do with technical media (not even text-based ones, like books). Laptops or smart phones undoubtedly take away the focus from the ‘human-in-the-room’ (for better or for worse – usually for worse in terms of attention unless these devices are actively built into the teaching process and made subservient to it). ‘Who can blame [students] for being disengaged?’ (79), if there is such an exciting world at their fingertips... Well, indeed, why teach ‘them’ at all? Not an argument that is entirely new. Digital *literacy* is a cop-out. As long as one keeps the term ‘literacy’, the educational goal will always be to save humanist instincts and values by extending their reading techniques into the ‘digital age’.⁸ This means that the digital is merely seen as a new ‘support’ (most work produced in the digital humanities seems to follow that logic). However, if you do take the ‘digital’ seriously the educational goal must be to unleash its radical and transformative potential and would require a radical transformation of reading into something that is no longer recognizable as and therefore also no longer subject to the limitations of ‘literacy’.

If we decide to engage with the second option, many things (need to) change indeed. But as long as reading and writing are considered fundamental ‘anthropotechnics’ (techniques that ‘make us human’) something like the (academic) essay will (have to) survive and therefore be taught and practiced. And since there is some writing (especially that kind done at an early stage in your educational career) that is better not shared, keeping the essay as a ‘piece of writing that nobody will ever read’ (87) except for the teacher, will have the same value as an *étude* when you learn to play the piano. That has got nothing to do with the myriad of possibilities you may want to introduce to give an essay more variety (both in terms of topic and media use – in my view digital storytelling is still such a kind of ‘essay’ as long as it comes with a scholarly apparatus and develops an argument). What indeed is so wrong or coercive about properly citing a source or not being ‘creative’ but technically astute, one may ask?

In order not to sound entirely negative or dismissive, the most interesting suggestion in my view that *Hacking the Academy* ‘affords’ is the one made by Gardner

⁸ See Gregory Ulmer’s by now classical argument for a shift towards a new ‘apparatus’ he calls ‘electracy’. See his *Internet Invention: From Literacy to Electracy* (London: Pearson, 2002).

Campbell. Unfortunately, I do not know of any specific university that has taken up this idea (but I would gladly stand corrected on this). Gardner proposes that university students should be given their own webservers (I guess one would call this a personal web hosting service today) ‘with built-in affordances ranging from database maintenance to web analytics’ (101) to create a ‘personal cyber infrastructure’. With the help of their university and their university training (and some mentoring and practical skills tutoring I assume) ‘they would become... system administrators for their own digital lives’ (102). The most likely environments and courses where you might find such an integrated approach would be in a media, design or illustration department I guess, but why not also in ‘core’ humanities subjects like theology, philosophy or literature? The university would thus play the role of a student’s digital life coach, so to speak... The question is whether these days ‘digital natives’ would still accept to be guided by anyone on how to build up and manage a ‘decent’ public academic profile outside social media or professional platforms (like LinkedIn, for example).

However, it is when it gets to ‘hacking the institution’, in the third part of the volume, that one probably feels the greatest disappointment. Ten years of hacking and the number of ‘contingent faculty... employed to teach the increasing number of students’ (115) has gone up rather than down. Which means that ‘literature’ (and the humanities in general) are today an even less ‘sustainable profession’ (116) than it was ten years ago.

No doubt people in the humanities – teachers and students – have embraced social media and some to very good and effective use, they have ‘amplified scholarly communication’ (117) and gained ‘network capital’ (118), but it becomes increasingly clear that a statement like the one by David Parry, that ‘scholars need to be online or be irrelevant, because our future depends upon it, but more importantly, the future of how knowledge production and dissemination takes place in the broader culture will be determined by it’ (119), today, in the time of ‘post-truth’ politics, infobesity and ‘postcritique’, sounds rather naively optimistic. The current regime of (mis)information dissemination itself is anything but ‘sustainable’. There is something to be said for rarity, deceleration, even reclusiveness – all of which have nothing to do with ‘elitism’ or ‘privilege’. Most people would probably agree that reflection and (self)analysis needs time and probably a bit of solitude and silence as well. Knowledge production cannot really be driven by competition for ‘visibility.’ What happened to the venerable idea of ‘research’, for example, or is there really ultimately no difference between a ‘search engine’ and a human researcher?

It is probably true that the institution of the academic conference based on physical attendance is going to disappear in the time of Zoom, climate change and now global social distancing rules. However, it is too easy to assume that social distancing can be made up for by meeting online as ‘posthumans’. In my view, posthumanism was never supposed to mean ‘dehumanisation’, or basically getting rid of (physical) contact between humans and eventually ‘transcending’ humans entirely. I do not think that this is what was ‘wrong’ with humanism, namely that humans congregated, engaged in material communication and bodily exchange in the ‘meatworld’. Even though every single academic has probably been to conferences that they were underwhelmed by and has thought about how to make conferences more worthwhile (e.g. by setting up rival ‘unconferences’ (125, 132-7)), there is also something to be said for rites and rituals. I have always found that ‘anthropologically’ studying academics and their behaviour at conferences, their power games, their narcissisms and so on, told me a lot about humans

including myself but also about society and institutions – a very practical Foucauldian lesson that will inevitably remain incomplete now that COVID-19 (in combination with the climate change movement) throws into question the very legitimacy of the human right to ‘free (physical) movement’.

A similar sort of thing could be said about what is happening to another academic institution: the ‘library’. Again I am not making an argument against the need to change, to take on board the new needs of the digital researcher and the new information politics. As Andrew Ashton explains, ‘[i]nstead of designing liaison, cataloguing, and collection-development services that support a predictable mode of scholarly work, libraries need to support scholarship that emerges from a state of relative entropy. The new mapping, in other words, is not to make traditional library services more digital, but rather to explode them out into a complementary state of entropy’ (141). Which all sounds very exciting and so much more marketable but, again, be careful what you wish for. I for one like going into a (physical or digital) library because I am looking to *decrease* ‘entropy’ – disorder in my ‘book’ is the rather ‘normal’ state of affairs. In order to create some kind of order, some sense of cohesion, some sense of identity and so on, one needs to invest energy or work to create ‘pockets of negentropy’. There is no point in substituting a ‘romanticised image of the library’ (141) with an equally (postmodern) romanticized notion of entropy, understood as ‘diversity’ or ‘creative’ mess. It is doubtful whether today’s and future researchers for whom disorientation is their daily bread are really going to be helped by libraries becoming ‘entropic’ themselves, in the sense of a ‘kaleidoscope of data, knowledge, and interaction’ (142).⁹ Just like its human users, the library might be arguing itself out of the picture; it might undermine its own legitimation to such an extent that people will just stop using it – which in turn will encourage ever more libraries to get rid of their physical stock, move to online only and instead rent out their physical space to faculties and research centres short of classrooms or office space. It will also push more and more libraries to ‘reinvent’ themselves as ‘meeting places’, usually in the form of ground-floor cafés (like many bookshops, too, by the way – bookshops in which you can physically browse books made out of paper, that is). Again, let me stress again that my motivation in saying all this is not nostalgia, but not everything is better only because it is said to ‘be the future’ and not every change is ‘inevitable’. This is the reason why I think posthumanism needs to be qualified by ‘critical’ – i.e. critical posthumanism. Perhaps we should not be so eager to become ‘posthuman’ as transhumanists (not posthumanists, ironically) suggest,¹⁰ until we know what exactly it is we are supposed to either give up, repress or get away from. If we have never been human in the same sense that Bruno Latour says we have never been modern, this does not mean that we should finally try to become it (i.e. human or modern) – which would be a nostalgic project indeed – but that we should rethink the very project of becoming and rather focus on understanding the *status quo* (including *the status quo ante*).

In fact, one is tempted to forget that *Hacking the Academy* is not only a general call for the humanities to change and embrace the new digital ‘reality’. It is at the same

⁹ Needless to say that this trend has not gone uncriticized or uncontested amongst librarians themselves, see for example Stacy Allison-Cassin’s illuminating piece on ‘Bodies, Brains, and Machines: An Exploration of the relationship between the Material and Affective States of Librarians and Information Systems’, *Library Trends* 68.3 (2020): 409-30; thanks to the editors for pointing this article out to me.

¹⁰ On the distinction between post- and transhumanism see my *Posthumanism: A Critical Analysis* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

time a self-legitimizing text of the digital humanities (cf. its subtitle), which ten years ago looked like being the next ‘big thing’ in the humanities. It is therefore inevitably embroiled in what Tim Carmody – in one of two short pieces at the end of the volume grouped under the heading ‘Cautions’ – refers to as ‘digital humanism’, which is a phrase that can mean a number of things. It can mean, as Tom Scheinfeldt (and maybe people in the digital humanities more generally) insinuates, a move away from ‘big ideas’, back towards ‘methodological refinement and disciplinary consolidation’ (57): ‘we are entering a new phase of scholarship that will be dominated not by ideas, but once again by organizing activities, both in terms of organizing knowledge, and organizing ourselves and our work’ (58). Digital humanists reconnect with scholarship not through ‘new theories’ but ‘new methods’ (58): ‘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’ (58), as Scheinfeldt writes.

Basically, this can be read as a caution against thinking ‘big thoughts’. The shift Scheinfeldt describes was always about the role of ‘theory’ in the humanities, one has to assume. What has come and been under threat more recently is therefore the ‘theoretical humanities’, not so much the humanities *per se*. The ‘unthinking’ (and a lot less ‘political’) humanities deem themselves to be rather safe from oblivion, selecting irrelevance as niche or subservience to big data and archiving. Gary Hall is one prominent voice who has been accusing the digital humanities of ‘data fetishism’.¹¹ Hall points towards the ‘scientific turn’ in the humanities in the light of the question that the sciences today have become ‘regarded as answering many humanities questions more convincingly than the humanities themselves’, especially when it comes to ‘biomedicine, neuroscience and theories of cognition’.¹² Indeed, in the sense of an urgent agenda for the humanities to *rethink* themselves, one might well go along with the title of Hall’s essay, namely ‘There Are No Digital Humanities’.

What was not on the radar of the people writing for *Hacking the Academy* is not so much what was happening *to* the humanities – namely, in one word, following Hall, its ‘Uberfication’¹³ – but what was happening elsewhere, *in* the humanities. To be fair, there is one instance in the volume where this is articulated, namely in relation to the new interdisciplinarity that digitalization has helped force into being, as David Parry explains: ‘If what the digital does is just take old disciplines and make them digital, leaving disciplinarity and the silo structure of the university intact, it will have failed. I want to see the digital transform not just the content or practice of the disciplines, but the very idea of disciplinarity’ (157). One might object two things, one that the university and most humanities departments or schools are still as ‘disciplinarily’ organised as they were (maybe with a few new disciplines added); and two, that inter- or transdisciplinary practice has always existed and might even be said to have preceded

¹¹ Gary Hall, ‘There Are No Digital Humanities’, in *Debates in the Digital Humanities*, ed. Matthew K. Gold (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 133.

¹² Hall, ‘There Are No Digital Humanities’, 134. The new inter- or transdisciplinary relationships between the humanities and the sciences are at the heart of the so-called ‘posthumanities’, which have led to a number of new formations like Environmental Humanities, Medical Humanities, Energy Humanities etc.

¹³ Gary Hall, *The Uberfication of the University* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016).

the establishment of (modern) disciplines.¹⁴ It is also still true, especially in uncertain times like ours, that taking the interdisciplinarity of your profile too far may well be a killer for your hiring prospects as a young academic, especially in humanities subjects like literature.

What Gary Hall calls ‘post-digital posthumanities’ in fact signals this shift in ‘subjectivity’ – the humanities are engaging with new interdisciplinary objects created by biotechnology, bioart, the medical or biohumanities, cognitive science, or the ‘neurohumanities’, for example. It combines these in a radical (‘disruptive’¹⁵) rethinking of (liberal humanist) academic practice based on ‘the individualized and indivisible proprietary author, originality, copyright and so forth’.¹⁶ It seems that, at least for Hall (and Stiegler), disruption is the new ‘hacking’.¹⁷ What Hall thinks is missing in posthumanist practice (not in its theoretical critique of anthropocentrism), however, is the kind of the ‘postcritical compositionism’ and situationist experimentation advocated by Latour and Haraway: ‘Even the most critical of posthuman theorists those who are not simply viewing the future of the human in either utopian... or dystopian terms... – seem intent on studying the animal, technology and the environment, more with a view to undermining anthropocentrism and humanist essentialism, than creatively exploring and experimenting with some of the core foundational concepts, values, forms, methods and practices of the humanities’.¹⁸ In short, Hall wants the ‘(post)digital (post)humanities’ to put their money where their mouth is. As long as they critique humanism from a predominantly humanities point of view, they are still protecting the *status quo*. Key in this, for Hall, is the question of the ‘open’ – open access, Open Humanities Press, the ‘gift economy’, pirate philosophy. In fact, Hall wants academics to give away and share their ‘radical’ ideas for free in the form of non-profit, open source, collective projects.

Apart from the fact that I am giving this non-book review away for free (to a journal that provides online full texts, for free, and whose editors, members of the advisory board and reviewers perform rigorous peer reviews, for free, and whose authors publish, for free) and that I will, of course, also eventually self-archive a copy for open access for whoever may be interested in my more or less radical views, there is one thing that Hall and the people working at the Centre for Disruptive Media in Coventry do not mention in their critique of the humanities, digital humanities or posthumanities and in their call for a shift from *critiquing* to *making* things. And that might well be the biggest ‘disconnect’ of all. They are all still academics – employed with, in the case of a research professor at least, quite a substantial salary – while being both protected and exploited subjects of and to a university. That, crucially, might

¹⁴ A point that is also made by Jacques Derrida, see his “The University Without Condition”, in *Without Alibi*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 202-37, and the entire discussion it created.

¹⁵ Cf. Bernard Stiegler, *Dans la disruption - comment ne pas devenir fou?* (Paris: Les liens qui libèrent, 2016).

¹⁶ Gary Hall, ‘What are the Digital Posthumanities?’, *Media Gifts*, 31 August 2013; available on Gary Hall’s website at: <http://garyhall.squarespace.com/journal/2013/8/31/what-are-the-digital-posthumanities.html> [accessed 15 July 2020].

¹⁷ Janneke Adema, and Gary Hall, ‘Posthumanities: The Dark Side of the ‘Dark Side of the Digital’, *Journal of Electronic Publishing* 19.2 (2016); available at <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/j/jep/3336451.0019.201/--posthumanities-the-dark-side-of-the-dark-side-of-the-digital?rgn=main;view=fulltext> [accessed 15 July 2020].

¹⁸ Hall, ‘What are the Digital Posthumanities?’.

constitute the biggest ‘paywall’ of all. No matter how radical, self-critical or even critically creative the whatever-humanities (post-, digital, disruptive, theoretical, more-than-human...) become, they are still institutionalised with all the benefits and entanglements and conflicting interests and power structures that entails. Therefore, if one wanted to follow through the disruptive logic, which in my view is just a prolongation or substitute for the idea of ‘hacking’, or self-pirating for that matter, one would have to take the last step – and jump.

It is a painful decision and process, but also liberating because you begin to see that all these ‘tenured radicals’, or those who regret the fact that they now probably never will be tenured, just continue cutting the branch they are sitting on with ever finer tools and ever more critical and creative means just to make sure it never leaves the trunk. Hacking looks like a very liberating gesture, disruption is the new opium for the academic people, cutting-edge is the last protection against the fall. This is where I return to my initial claim: today’s humanities are a (Baudrillardian) simulacrum that continue repressing the fact that there are no humanities. The humanities have lost their ‘subject’. They have lost their subject in the sense of their ‘object of study’, i.e. the ‘human’; they have lost their subject in the sense of ‘what they teach’, i.e. ‘humanism’, ‘literacy’, ‘critique’, etc.; they have lost their subject in the sense of their subject matter, i.e. a definable ‘body’ of knowledge, their ‘disciplines’... They have lost their *raison d’être*. And, since many (mainly inveterate humanists, of course, or at least those who feel that something important might be lost or might change for the worse) believe the humanities to be somehow central to the idea of a university¹⁹ – that idea of a university might be beyond salvation, too. Today, saving the humanities comes too late. It may indeed be counterproductive. The best service one might thus do to the humanities is to save them from themselves.

But who is going to take care and look after the ‘tradition’ – literature, philosophy, language, history, the arts... – one might object? Well, probably *not* the academy. The word ‘academy’ goes back to the name of a grove of trees, the *silvas Academi*, the groves of Academus,²⁰ outside Athens where Plato used to teach. The grove itself is named after an Attic ‘local hero’, Academos, who in betraying the secret of where Theseus was hiding Helena managed to save Athens from invasion and destruction.

One final heretic thought: one might also suggest that the whole frenzy about the humanities, their transformation, (ir)relevance and survival is more or less an Anglo-American invention or problem. In this sense, it would merely be a tell-tale sign of its (globalised) provincialism.

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¹⁹ See Eagleton, ‘The Death of Universities’.

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