Introduction: Digital Curation in German Studies

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Introduction: Digital Curation in German Studies

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This special issue focuses on a kind of humanities engagement that spans many areas of activity, from pedagogy to data visualization and from archives to activism: digital curation in German Studies. To complement the four peer-reviewed articles in this issue, we solicited shorter thought pieces for a forum section, which has occasionally been included in *Seminar* issues to respond to current methodological, pedagogical, or *wissenschaftspolitische* concerns. The term *curation* has been used to an inflationary degree in recent years to describe a variety of digital practices and activities (and not only digital ones). To be sure, calling such rather basic activities as collecting and ordering "curation" might occasionally be born out of a desire to enhance new humanities projects with the nimbus of the connoisseurs' craft. But, as James Skidmore points out in his forum piece on digital curation and pedagogy (288–94), the desire to curate might also hark back to the root concept: *curare*, the activity of caring for, preserving, keeping, and safeguarding, and the *curatus*/curator as the person engaged in these and related activities. But in addition to preservation, the digital curator's care also includes the creation of meaningful groupings (indeed, creating new meanings through such new groupings). One could go so far as to say that digital curation always entails the self-fashioning of humanities practitioners, their self-curation as researchers. As Skidmore argues, digital curation has become an indispensable part of the job of instructors in the humanities. Teaching students how to be digital curators has advanced to an important curricular element in German Studies and other humanities fields.

Despite this general applicability and appeal, it is perhaps not wholly coincidental that the impulse to see digital curation as a particularly interesting and fortuitous contemporary constellation in German Studies and beyond is shared among both of us, the medieval literature scholar and the contemporary feminist media scholar. In medieval studies, digital curation has become a particularly active and methodologically innovative subfield, which has led to a reinvigoration of the field of text editing and commentary, often in conjunction with reproductions of manuscript facsimiles. On a very basic level, digital facsimiles

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and editions of medieval manuscripts and texts are curatorial in responding to librarians' and archivists' impulses to safeguard unique, fragile, and valuable manuscripts. But digital editions have greatly enhanced the general accessibility of original texts, simply by putting photographic representations on the web, thereby—at least in theory—liberating students and researchers from prescriptive and canonized texts that are often based on nineteenth-century editions or at least on nineteenth-century editorial principles. Digital curation of medieval texts has also allowed researchers and students to think about the editorial representation of fluid text conditions before the advent of print and copyright. Indeed, the era of the fixated text, dominated by the reproductive textual conditions of print culture and copyright, turns out more and more to have been a phase in media history that is framed by preprint and postprint condition; as is always the case with changes in media technologies, rather than being revolutions, new phases do not shed the older medial conditions and techniques; rather, their functions and evaluations are modified (see the discussion by Born).

Although the move to virtual philology (Lechtermann and Stock) and digital curation has enabled medievalists to represent medieval and early modern cultural production as process rather than focusing on the printed book text as a magisterial philological product (Sahle 240)—and is in this very much a project of literary historians—the shift to processuality of digital editions (and digital curation more broadly) is a methodological concern that is shared across all humanities disciplines and eras. To put it differently, medievalists find new ways to represent and make accessible both the medieval manuscript pages as graphic works of art and the text they contain as decipherable textual works of art; these new ways might speak to the new ways in which the opportunities of virtuality have fuelled the digital curation of cross-media objects, as is evident in our current issue in Verena Kick's discussion of the Weimar photobook (243–63). In her analysis, such platforms as Scalar and Critical Commons allow for not only greater primary source accessibility to researchers, students, and an interested public, but also the ability to replicate for users the experience of a visual literacy contemporaneous to the original's production. Thus, the digital re-envisioning allows for dynamic interaction between the text-image conglomerate of the photobook *Deutschland, Deutschland über Alles* (1929) by Kurt Tucholsky and John Heartfield and its curation as a digital book, including links to research.

But digital curation can also have an impact on canonization processes in German Studies, as the article by Mae Velloso-Lyons, Quinn Dombrowski, and Kathryn Starkey (193–216) shows. Providing the opportunity to share more widely working translations of texts that have not been at the centre of the field, the Global Medieval Sourcebook showcases texts and translations of a variety of sources from cultures spanning the Middle East and Europe. Although the goal of the project has been to make better known and accessible to the interdisciplinary community of medieval scholars texts that have hitherto not been central to the field, the article also highlights the challenges of finding viable and sustainable models to preserve digitally curated material in changing technological landscapes. In both ways, what has curatorial value shifts as new media sheds new light on old media, and, of equal methodological significance, as medieval

manuscripts shed "old light on new media" (Kiss et al.). Our carefully demarcated epoch-oriented fields collide.

In this sense, features of digital curation as it applies to the medieval textual and cultural production—methodological innovation, process over product, intermedial communication, community-building properties—can also be seen as commonalities across many of the epochs and fields represented in this special issue. Indeed, whether we are discussing digital philology and editing of medieval German sources or the online compilation and assessment of present-day visual or textual discursive formations, the potential vis-à-vis both the object and the audience that is opened up by the concept of the "curatorial" is shared among all. Curation is a making practice, one that is driven by relationality and whose result reaches well beyond the original material. The outcome is an entirely new work that is accountable to a very different public than those standard humanities research outputs codified in many annual assessment mechanisms.

Thus a fundamental question at the heart of this special issue might be: how have new collaborative forms of digital research production and dissemination changed the way we "do" German Studies? Curation itself comes from museum studies practices and is equally at home in departments of fine arts or information studies (Library or Museum Studies). It is usually not situated in German Studies or modern languages departments. But as the bodies and mechanisms that support and assess research expand their expectations as to what counts as "impact" to include particularly open-access and open-source outputs ("Tri-Agency")—indeed, in 2015 the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, along with its health and sciences counterparts, adopted an open-access policy for all of their funded research projects—so do the possibilities for not only alternative forms of research presentation but also the fundamental research questions and their methodological foundations. In their analysis of Russian writer Ivan Sergeevič Turgenev's contacts with a number of celebrated nineteenth-century German authors (217–42), Larissa Polubojarinova, Werner Frick, Gesa von Essen, Katja Hauser, and Olga Kulishkina show how the approach to quantitative and qualitative data, through data visualization techniques including tables and Gephi graphs, suggests a methodological approach to the writer's letters that is in many ways more akin to contemporary analyses of digital social networking mechanisms. Therefore, taking the "network" as their starting point, they show how Turgenev acts as a facilitator or "broker" of cultural relationships through his web of correspondence.

The very manner in which curatorial practices not only become a means for arranging and displaying research outputs differently, but also a method of research itself, allows for an opening up of German Studies that also has implications for the academy and its understanding of disciplinarity. Here we might borrow a definition from research-creation, which is the pedagogical intersection of research-driven or research-informed artistic practices and the production of art as research. Research-creation experimental forms of research and pedagogy offer a manner of thinking about digital curation as reaching beyond mere instrumentalization (i.e. digital curation as the translation into "real-world" relatability of university scholarship) to become the transformation of research and

pedagogy itself, and potentially of our discipline. "[W]hen the dialogic and pedagogical start to be used as artistic *material*, the university becomes both a site of institutional critique and an exploratory playground" (Loveless 9–10, author's emphasis). This is a more hopeful approach to thinking about the difficulties that arts and humanities disciplines—German Studies included—equally face as university budgets continue to shrink. Curatorial practices within German Studies, therefore, cannot only be seen as instrumentalization of our public impacts and therefore our value (the "Why study German?" question), but rather the focus on process offers an alternative way of thinking about the impact of different research practices on our very approach to thought, how we might look at an object or text, and how we might train students in our craft. "To state the obvious, how one does one's pedagogy in a field impacts what *can* and *is* done in that field" (Loveless 13, author's emphasis). In the virtual world of digital curation, pedagogy reaches beyond the university classroom into public spheres. Thus the promise of digital curation is not only that it enables humanities research to reach beyond academe, but that thinking about the discipline of German Studies in such a curatorial way might change disciplinary self-descriptions, and might make such descriptions more legible to two audiences that humanities practitioners often find themselves to both court and fear: the public as well as university administrators.

At the same time, digital curation also transforms the understanding of who is welcomed into the classroom, reshaping what the classroom might look like beyond institutional facilities. The collaborative forum piece on the creation of the *Grenzenlos Deutsch* open-education resource (303–18) looks at just this question: how to curate a curriculum as a public digital archive of inclusive instructional materials. As the authors (Amy D. Young, Louann Terveer, Faye Stewart, Simone Pfleger, Maureen O. Gallagher, and Brigetta M. Abel) make clear, *Grenzenlos Deutsch* fulfills a variety of functions, such as diversifying what is projected as "German" in the language classroom, but also altering the manner in which language acquisition specialists and practitioners imagine their pedagogical task and audience as well as how they bring their own identities and subject positions into play with learners and material. Collaborative, dialogic, and processural ways of doing humanities research together is ideally modelled in ways that the comparatively static textual, artistic, informational, or instructional object creation in the logic of book culture only rarely could be. In addition, collaborative and democratic co-creation can be further exposed (and curated itself) because it has become not only easy but also wise practice to document and credit collaborative authorship and individual involvement in creative processes within the sphere of web-based and processual virtuality. In much this way, the co-founders of Diversity, Decolonization, and the German Curriculum (DDGC), Regine Criser and Ervin Malakaj, reflect in their forum piece on the ways in which digital publishing platforms offer spaces for individual members, particularly those marginalized by the academy, to co-create knowledge (295–302). Leaning on Sara Ahmed's identification of complaint as a "misfit genre," they see the DDGC blog to function as a misfit archive, curating and compiling

knowledge about those queer, misaligned, ill-fitting voices that do not find their place in settler colonial structures of the academy. In this way, the collaborative and "coalitional" (Smith et al.) opportunities afforded through digital curation realize its community-building and scholar-activist possibilities.

It is undoubtedly true that digital curation has increased accessibility and allowed for creative collocations of material independent of its place or occurrence in the non-virtual world (if it isn't born digital to start with). But curating these more accessible virtual objects and representations often requires the resources and infrastructures of large institutions and major corporations, which reveals the politics of digital archives to be one of scale. In Jennifer V. Evans's discussion of the origins, expansions, and implications of the New Fascism Syllabus project (264–87), we see how scale, in the form of the contested landscape of Facebook, becomes essential for a collective production of academic arguments to oppose the resurgence of authoritarianism around the world. The article shows how memory culture inserts itself into popular culture in the digital space of Facebook in ways meaningful and useful for researchers and instructors alike. Collective crowdsourcing of methodologies possible only in this realm transforms the shape of collaborative responsibility. At the same time, there is an exclusive side to this apparent inclusivity. As Evans's article notes, the example of Facebook is not only notoriously fraught in terms of its approach to privacy and data, but its potential as a research partner with such funding bodies as the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) is undermined by control over data sets. Nevertheless, considering a platform such as Facebook or other social networking and blogging sites not only as a place to create an international community around urgent academic topics, but also as an object to be researched for the very impact and reach of those conversations, offers insight into public interest in humanities scholarship and the importance of scholars' voices in shaping (and making sense of) popular political discourse.

It might be posited that it is not only the discipline of German Studies and its adjacent fields that may be transformed by digital creation, but also who "counts" as author or editor. Social media allows for highly individualized access to curatorial practices: it becomes an avenue of curation. This is not to say that the act of digital curation is always an inclusive and democratic one. The mechanisms (algorithms, social media practices) of online worlds interfere and even do violence. Digital curation brings with it power imbalance and violence also part of offline spheres. In her piece for the forum section of this issue (310–18), Didem Uca addresses the manner in which people of colour in Germany and the US have utilized hashtags in the context of Black Lives Matter and #MeToo to decentre whiteness, even while these efforts are constantly under threat of co-option (by social justice advocates) or disruption (by the radical right). Accessibility and inclusion of digital platforms can also mean a threat to the very efforts that activist movements and scholarship engender. This might not be the only price to be paid for these new accessibilities: fundamentally, curatorial object/subject relations shift when both texts and humans become increasingly curated by algorithms.

Although digital curation has enabled new forms of text/image manipulations, innovative artistic approaches to the materiality of visceral and virtual worlds, and the dissemination of humanities-related content through non-traditional or interactive curative forms, that act of innovation must also be responsive to ongoing transformations in digital accessibility, keyword inclusivity, and appropriate as well as equitable classifications and use of metadata. Equally, for historically more remote areas, the number of online facsimiles of medieval manuscripts now available has moved the methodological challenge away from making the sources accessible to best editorial practices. A consideration of digital curation from these varied disciplinary and temporal perspectives brings rise to the series of new methodological and political questions featured in this special issue.

The relevance of these fundamental questions is particularly obvious in the moment in which the authors in this volume found themselves writing these essays and in which we are currently crafting this introduction: the context of COVID-19. Even as the topic of the issue and the digital curational works addressed in the articles and in the forum were all well under way prior to the advent of the crisis, as this issue goes to press, the world has passed the one-year mark on the pandemic, and most institutions—academic and otherwise—remain shuttered to the public. If we suggest above that alternative modes of research dissemination and text-object presentation offer a means of connecting with a different public, nowhere was this felt more urgently than in this past year. Digital curation became for many institutions not only a form of virtual presentation but a lifeline, even a sign of life. Time will tell whether the impacts to life during the pandemic will resonate beyond the material to change the very shape of human interactions.

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