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Precarious Labor and the Digital Humanities

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We want to believe that we can be agile and innovative, like Silicon Valley says it is, by making DH run with short-term grants, app contests, and temporary labor. We want to have a sort of Uber-style sharing economy for DH-research. But this is not how one supports careful, enduring scholarship and teaching.

—Miriam Posner, “Money and Time”

Despite the money and prestige that seems to come with the label, digital humanities is a field that relies on grants and temporary positions to establish credibility on campuses. As a result, DH laborers are frequently precarious across institutions. They occupy a startling range of positions: administrators, adjuncts, postdocs, graduate and undergraduate students, tenure-track and contingent faculty, librarians, archivists, programmers, IT and edtech specialists, consultants, museum curators, artists, authors, editors, and more.

Members of the American Studies Association Digital Humanities Caucus, who work across other precarious fields like African American studies, disability studies, ethnic studies, feminist studies, and more, recognize the many ways in which the value of our labor has been challenged, taken for granted, dismissed outright, or explained away as at best a fad or at worst the manifestation of neoliberalism in its most craven form within the humanities.¹ These experiences have motivated us to make forms of digital labor and the agents behind this labor more visible, to create standards of evaluation that help practitioners and nonpractitioners define and describe the value of digital scholarship, and to sustain generative relationships that address the ethical dimensions of collaborative labor on digital humanities initiatives. It is our hope that this conversation can contribute to building solidarity with other precarious workers across the academy.

The Precarity of DH in and beyond American Studies

Within American studies, students and faculty members interested in digital scholarship encounter many situations where support for digital labor could be greatly improved. While there has been compelling digital scholarship in American studies that takes a traditional form, collaborative, public-facing, and iterative digital scholarship proves challenging in environments that privilege the monograph. Consider the tenure-track faculty member required to print hard copies of born-digital scholarship far afield from the monograph, whose portfolio may be read by a department and an administration with no clear guidelines for how to promote the employees they hired to “do” digital work. Consider the graduate student encouraged to situate herself within digital humanities by completing digital projects in addition to a dissertation, taking on part-time positions, or even paying for additional credentials. While several humanities departments and professional organizations have taken steps to develop guidelines for professional evaluation of digital labor, these recommendations may not serve the varied forms of academic labor beyond the tenure-track model. How do we help members of the community interested in more creative or multimodal endeavors or forms—films, exhibitions, games, documentaries, oral histories—demonstrate the institutional and professional value of their labor to audiences who do not find its importance self-evident?

Scholars looking for collaborators or material resources on campus may find their work challenged by the conditions of labor created by understaffing, particularly if a single employee is expected to serve a wide range of campus needs. Digital scholarship in American studies often involves the labor of experts who institutionally reside elsewhere on campus. Many of these individuals work in libraries, where they may collaborate with American studies students and faculty members. Others may be former American studies students who earned library degrees or gained employment in traditional or “alt-ac” roles. While some of these employees work in supportive environments where their time and expertise is valued or where their contributions to digital scholarship are visible and documented, this is not always the case. For example, Leigh Bonds and Alex Gil note that many experts in digital scholarship “have been given the mandate to coordinate and support digital scholarship at our institutions without being part of a fully-staffed center or institute” and are expected to operate as “miracle workers” on campus, performing as scholars, tech support, administrators, project consultants, and more.² Paige Morgan suggests that even the tongue-in-cheek designation of the “miracle worker”

has the effect of creating “mystification around the process” of digital labor by failing to recognize the “labor and coordination” by a range of collaborators required for digital scholarship.³ Whether we count them as collaborators or colleagues, the precarity of digital laborers in these spaces should be addressed by American studies and related fields, as it affects our scholarship and creates a troubling campus and community environment.

Mentorship and Future Prospects

Digital laborers face particular challenges in mentorship and advancement in university contexts. Their work, and their positions, is often new to the university, so there is little institutional memory about how best to succeed. Even if the position carries a respectable title, a salary, and benefits, it is often asking too much of one person, especially an early-career scholar. A “digital scholarship coordinator” or a “digital humanities research designer” frequently supports the research of faculty who are more advanced and seek solutions to complex research questions and methodological challenges. Asking early-career scholars to support the research of advanced scholars flips the mentor framework, and it can leave less time in the work week to devote to writing for scholarly publications and university presses, forms of labor that remain privileged components of many tenure and promotion review protocols.

While they often lack the mentorship and professional development resources traditionally given to junior faculty in academic departments, many digital scholars are also frequently expected to act as administrators—a job that they are not qualified or paid to do. Much of their time is spent in high-level meetings with CIOs and deans, giving presentations to administrative councils, donors, and granting agencies. This requires them to advocate for themselves and speak about a program they are growing, with little to no understanding of how the institution operates. Even if this position is funded by a permanent salary line, scholars specializing in digital humanities are often at higher risk of not advancing to the next tier or not having their contract renewed because of insufficient support as they navigate through the tricky landscape of higher education.

Temporary positions like postdocs and visiting assistant professorships may offer the promise of a “first step” in one’s career, but they are often, in practice, a way to fill gaps in programming or sustain curricular diversity without committing to a worker’s future prospects. Even with reasonable pay and full benefits, temporary jobs with high teaching loads make the work of finding the

next gig a tricky proposition. Any worker in the academy, whether temporary or not, knows that moving to a new institution requires vast amounts of time and energy in both personal and professional areas of life. With limited-term appointments, the first few months of orientation and settling in are also consumed with another round of job applications.

Summer Institutes

Many digital humanists, particularly those in precarious positions, seek education and training opportunities outside their graduate institutions to enhance their prospects. One of the most popular venues for doing so are summer institutes, which promise an “ideal environment for discussing and learning about new computing technologies and how they are influencing teaching, research, dissemination, creation, and preservation.”⁴ Given the high cost of attendance, many digital humanists seeking this training face significant barriers to participation.

As these seminars become more popular, host institutions capitalize on this demand by offering more prestigious credentialing options for participants. At one time, the Digital Humanities Summer Institute offered a certificate in digital humanities that cost upwards of \$5,000 but required little more than attendance at five courses. Many individuals flock to such programs to gain the experience necessary to procure better employment opportunities. As Tressie McMillan Cottom notes in an interview, this hope is based not necessarily on the value of the degree but on employers’ increasing demand for workers with highly specific training: “To be competitive we are all told that we have to pursue and pay for credentials over our entire working careers. This is an especially pernicious risk shift from the employment sector to minority workers, who are already more likely to be unemployed and underemployed than are white workers. . . . For these reasons, the risk shift of job training, or credentialing, directly undermines equity agendas.”⁵ Credentialing programs not only capitalize on precarious labor models but also reinforce inequalities of access.

Instructors for these events receive little compensation for their work. Programs typically offer cost of travel and, at times, a small stipend, but this amounts to only a fraction of the tuition paid for the certificate. The value for instructors, therefore, is the prestige that comes with teaching at summer institutes—an act that reinforces and even emulates the precarious labor models we see both in the digital humanities and across academe writ large.

Long-Term Planning and Sustainability

Many digital humanists, as well as their critics, have noted the stratification of labor in the digital humanities and the scarcity of resources available to sustain those various classes of workers and the larger collaborations or centers to which they contribute. Grant-funded digital projects and centers are central to digital humanities initiatives, and they influence how DH is institutionalized—or not.

Ithaka S+R's "Sustainability Implementation Toolkit" offers a broad and holistic work plan for "developing an institutional strategy for supporting digital humanities projects."⁶ This plan suggests that projects look to the culture of the entire institution, as well as resources available at other local organizations, to create a sustainable financial and labor framework. In recent years, grantors such as the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Mellon Foundation, and the MacArthur Foundation, which have been instrumental in directing funding toward humanities programs through DH initiatives, have taken steps to ensure that colleges and universities institutionalize the programs for which they provide start-up funds. The Mellon Foundation, for instance, requires data and documentation to be made publicly available and asks institutions to commit to the continued employment of staff hired under the auspices of a grant.

Though grantors may receive promises from campus administrators, faculty PIs and grant-funded staff have little power to ensure that those commitments are kept. This is especially true in periods of economic crises or budget cuts, when increasing dependence on contingent faculty and decreasing protections for academic staff such as librarians further exacerbates the power disparities between permanent administrators, tenured faculty, and contingent or at-will staff employees, whether or not they are tied to precarious funding. Smaller campuses that depend on off-site servers and services for digital projects are especially susceptible to the challenges posed by changes that come with transitions in senior-level administrators, rising costs for digital services, and market pressure that makes it more and more untenable to hire programmers or designers who may not be available on-site.

The Digital Humanities Berkeley blog concludes that "few DH projects will ever achieve the level of support or traffic that requires having full-time support staff dedicated to the maintenance of that project. Realistically, the maintenance of inactive or archived projects will fall to a staff member at an IT department, the institution's library, or a DH center who juggles maintenance for a portfolio of projects alongside their day-to-day responsibilities."⁷ Increased openness in information, data, and infrastructure may help extend

the lifespan of individual projects, but this technological solution does not begin to address the problems related to labor.

Conclusion

There must be continued and sustained investment from institutions of higher ed, independent of grant funds, toward *human resources*, rather than stopgaps for acquiring digital resources. In the end, it is always the skilled people and the communities they build who will sustain programs and projects.

Julia Flanders has described how terms like *efficiency* and *productivity* are selectively and voluntarily deployed and circulated in descriptions of academic forms of labor, and she observes the ways faculty labor is generally privileged at higher institutional, financial, and social levels, even though “the vast preponderance of actual *work* involved in creating humanities scholarship and resources is not done by faculty.”⁸ Notice that the word *digital* is missing from this assessment of humanities labor: digital humanities practitioners like Flanders are well aware that concerns about precarious labor extend beyond their more immediate institutional and departmental contexts. If American studies is serious about supporting digital humanities work in an ethical and sustainable manner, it should also reflect more broadly on the privileging of certain forms of labor and kinds of laborers in its professional networks and channels of employment and promotion.

Additional Reading

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Notes

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