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Journal of World History, Volume 32, Number 2, June 2021, pp. 191-197
(Article)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jwh.2021.0020>

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Digital Methods + Empire Histories = New, Old, and Emerging Practices

ANTOINETTE BURTON

This essay introduces the special issue, “Digital Methods, Empire Histories,” by offering both a gloss of the essays collected and a critical take on the limits and possibilities of digital history for the project of decolonizing global histories of empire.

KEYWORDS: anglophone digital humanities, imperial archives, colonial subjects, data sovereignty, digital pedagogy, decolonizing history.

THE technological evangelism of much of anglophone digital humanities discourse should sit uneasily with empire historians, who know what languages of discovery and “new frontiers” have meant in the context of world history, especially where data collection is concerned. To be sure, digitization has made myriad colonial archives, official and unofficial, available via open access platforms. This means that vast stores of knowledge are now at our fingertips—a proximity and immediacy that has reshaped the lived experience of archival research for many scholars, in this case bringing the imperial world not just closer to home but into the hands of anyone who has access to a cellphone. And the revolution in digital tools in the last twenty-five years has given rise to equally vast possibilities for gathering and visualizing evidence as well as for scaling and interpreting data: for worlding, mostly by aggregation and consolidation, what we aim to know about the kinds of colonial pasts that are available and capturable via text and image. Yet, this information empire is not exactly new. Digitization most often reassembles archival collections proper, sometimes remixing them with print and visual culture and typically organizing them through mechanisms and selection processes that are more or less visible depending on the commitment to transparency of

the conglomerator. In some cases, those conglomerators are private individuals or government entities; in others, corporate sponsors; in still others, community-based activists.¹ Inevitably perhaps, today's digital imperial "data" are actually, more accurately, digitally transformed imperial sources. And for colonial subjects, as for the enslaved, data has more often than not meant terror at the scene of the crime.²

Much as it ever was, in other words, imperial knowledge is situated knowledge. That is to say, then as now, evidence about imperial power and experience is produced out of specific historical conditions and economies, rooted in entrepreneurial as well as technical cultures, shaped to count *as knowledge* from the start by the regimes in which it was and is embedded—and most often exclusive of the experience of the colonized, the indigenous, and imperial worlds from below. Claims of possibility and freedom in this realm should arguably be treated with the same critical skepticism that historians have brought to empire history over the course of the same quarter of a century, which has seen the explosion of digital capacity in the humanities. In that sense, digital humanities is subject to the same decolonizing imperative we have seen operating in empire studies in the wake of 20th century postcolonial history.³

This is more than a claim about "raw data" being an oxymoron.⁴ Nor is it the same as saying that biases in digital protocols are "designed in" and hence allow only "choice for disciplined freedoms" or even that discrimination by design practically guarantees that computation produces a "new Jim Code"—though these arguments and orientations are critical to decolonizing digital methods and practices.⁵ What I am suggesting is that the "digital" in any emergent formation of digital world history can act as an imperializing agent if we are not careful about how we frame our work and as importantly, if we are not vigilant about the imperial and imperializing histories still at work in many of the frames—modernity, aesthetics, progress, the archive, and even

¹ And sometimes they are combinations of all these interests, both within the university (see Northeastern University's [Early Caribbean Digital Archive](https://ecda.northeastern.edu/), <https://ecda.northeastern.edu/>) and without (see the indigeneity-centered [Mukurtu](https://mukurtu.org), <https://mukurtu.org>).

² See Jessica Marie Johnson, "Markup Bodies: Black [Life] Studies and Slavery [Death] Studies at the Digital Crossroads," *Social Text* 36, no. 4 (137) (2018): 70.

³ For the historically particular impact of "modularity at midcentury" and the paradox of encoding race invisibly in the post WWII era, see Tara McPherson, *Feminist in a Software Lab: Difference and Design* (Harvard, 2018), 42–71.

⁴ See Lisa Gitelman, ed., *Raw Data is an Oxymoron* (MIT, 2013).

⁵ Raiford Guins, *Edited Clean Version: Technology and the Culture of Control* (Minnesota 2009), 19 and 21; Ruha Benjamin, ed., *Captivating Technology: Race, Carceral Technoscience and Liberatory Imagination in Everyday Life* (Duke, 2019), 3.

resistance itself—that we mobilize as part of digital historical practice. In short, we risk a reinscription of empire’s ideological and technical operations if we fetishize the digital as a new emancipatory horizon rather than view it as an extension of earlier modes of knowledge production newly instrumentalized by regimes of global capital and computation which are, in turn, no more or less exempt from scrutiny and analysis than any other world historical forces we study.⁶

How, then, are historians of empire taking up the digital in 2021, and to what ends? What follows is a set of essays which model a range of approaches and methods—and as significantly, offer a combination of appreciative use of and critical engagement with the tools currently available to scholars interested in researching and teaching what Roopika Risam calls “the digital cultural record” of colonialism in modern world history.⁷ It is the plurality of those methods and approaches that I am keen to emphasize here, not least because they underscore the variety of pathways users can take in the digital space, not all of which require computational knowledge or an unqualified/utopian embrace of the digital per se. Though there is no guarantee that readers will read the essays in any particular order, especially if they are browsing on line, it is precisely the juxtaposition of essays that underscores both the mixed-methods message and the *variorum* character of this special issue. Emily Burrill, for example, narrates her experience of using a digital camera in the Centre des Archives d’Outre Mer (CAOM) in Aix-en-Provence in connection with her research on gun ownership in the late colonial world of West Africa. Her’s is a comparatively low-tech approach, which asks nonetheless important methodological and epistemological questions about the relationship between seeing and sorting in the context of French postcolonial politics and political economy. At the other end of the spectrum, Stephen Doherty and his team assess the capacity of a computerized text analysis program to predict word meaning, sentiment, and parts of speech in nineteenth-century sources from white settler colonies, while Hamish Maxwell-Stewart and colleagues track crime and penal transportation histories through record-linking across datasets that

⁶ I acknowledge how my thinking has been shaped here by, among others, Safiya Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Oppression* (NYU, 2018); James E. Dobson, *Critical Digital Humanities: The Search for a Methodology* (Illinois, 2019); and ongoing conversations with my inestimable colleagues at Illinois, Dr. Carolyn Randolph and Professors Kathy Oberdeck and Ruby Mendenhall.

⁷ Roopika Risam, *New Digital Worlds: Postcolonial Digital Humanities in Theory, Praxis and Pedagogy* (Northwestern University Press, 2019). See also the [postcolonial DH blog](https://dhpoco.org) (last accessed February 2020), <https://dhpoco.org>.

have not heretofore been connected. Somewhere in between, perhaps, lies Daniel Domingues de Silva's team of researchers who have themselves built one of the largest databases of [enslaved Africans](#) which is completely open access—making public sources that, as they note, were “originally created for imperial designs.” It is admittedly challenging *not* to be impressed, awed even, by the scope and scale of intellectual ambition, political commitment, and digital methods chops of these projects. At the same time, and as each essay shows, fidelity to the historian's craft and to a critical take on archival limits and possibilities is woven through each of these studies. As Maxwell-Stewart and his collaborators readily admit, the problem of “data sovereignty” that undergirds their entire project exemplifies how critical DH and critical empire history converge can and should converge in the field of digital imperial world history. Similarly, as Kate Bagnall and Tim Sherratt explore in their work on migration in the British empire, there is no totality of vision across digitized sources, only “missing links.” Indeed, instead of a vast and complete database of documents, they “work with a complex patchwork of systems, scales, and meanings digitized collections” precisely to expose the uneven ground of the imperial as a world system. An echo of the “raw-data-is-an-oxymoron” argument cited above, all of this work moves theoretical claims more deeply into the mud and guts of historical environments where they can be refined, tested, recalibrated, and repurposed well beyond the limits of humanities disciplines.

The collection of projects assembled here also raises important questions about the changing nature of single-authored historical research in imperial and world history both. “Team DH” echoes the “team science” model in STEM fields, though collaborations invariably take different forms depending on the research problem at hand. Projects like James Parker's and Ryan Horne's are monographical, as it were, but they each rely on tools and databases constructed by teams of data specialists and others whom they may or may not know personally. Parker uses the digitized newspaper repository [Oceanic Exchanges](#) (funded by the NEH) to track the reception of the Hungarian nationalist Lajos Kossuth in a transnational imperial study that reveals the importance of highly localized reception through a comparative lens made possible by the tool which amplifies the Austro-Hungarian empire angle. Horne relies on software, digital techniques, and linked open data (LOD) resources to model the Hellenistic Attalid Kingdom geospatially, drawing as well on the [Pleiades Project](#) (also funded by the NEH) to show how the Stoa Consortium of digital classicists makes similar use of such resources. Jo Guldi, for her part, shows how the

digitized version of Hansard's, possibly the largest archive of parliamentary government in the world, can be mined and visualized in order to produce a distant reading protocol for distilling trends in the vocabulary of imperial geopolitics. In all three cases, these scholars are part of a scholarly community of makers, users, readers, and interpreters—scholarly ecosystems which are not new, but which are now more expansive and visible thanks to proliferating forms of connectivity made possible by global technology.

Last but not least, Sharon Block asks us to think critically about how to engage enduring paradigms, new technologies, and emerging practices in the classroom. Her genealogical approach to the story of the digital history graduate curriculum reminds us of not only how comparatively quickly technological acceleration has occurred but also of how unevenly new pedagogies may be distributed across the landscape of higher education, for a host of reasons (related to the difference between publics and privates, the impact of the 2008 recession, and the erosion of resources including new hiring in the humanities, for example). Anecdotally, when I taught the required 1st year/incoming graduate seminar in Approaches and Methods at Illinois in fall 2019, very few students beyond those doing a joint degree in library science had digital capacity specific to history. Perhaps more telling, for an assignment designed to familiarize them with the last ten years of 6 different history journals across several fields, no one turned up a single mention of an essay rooted in digital humanities approaches. Change may be afoot, but interdisciplinary venues may be more likely homes for digital humanities-based scholarship for now.⁸ Meanwhile, each author here has devoted some space in their essay to addressing how their research can be addressed in a variety of classroom settings.

As a newcomer to the field of digital humanities/digital history, I am struck by how dominated it is, even now, by the concerns and interests of literary scholars.⁹ That, combined with the decidedly antihistoricist

⁸ Among other things, I had the incoming students read Claire Bond Potter, "[A Hacker in Every History Department](#)." A number of them were familiar Lara Putnam's *American Historical Review* article, "[The Transnational and the Text-Searchable: Digitized Sources and the Shadows They Cast](#)." And as this special issue is going to press, the *AHR* published an essay by Tyler Anbinder, Cormac Ó Gráda, and Simone A. Wegge, "[Networks and Opportunities: A Digital History of Ireland's Great Famine Refugees in New York](#)," which makes the case for developing a plural and diverse notion of what counts as digital, relying as it does on excel spread sheets and team of researchers for tracking down and visualizing immigrant banking networks.

⁹ And I have come into this space not as a practitioner but as a humanities center director and as the Principal Investigator of a pilot program, [Training in Digital Methods for Humanists](#), funded by University of Illinois' "Investment for Growth" program.

turn in literary studies, should alert historians to the urgency of turning their attention to this domain, if only as a matter of professional obligation (rather than practice per se). As an interdisciplinary feminist historian and an antiempire scholar preoccupied with both archives and methodologies, I am interested in bringing more historians of imperialism to conversations about DH and its future in the university, in part because the ascendance of data science in higher education over the next decade is likely to result in #HistoryNotNeeded, #DHUS-Centric, and #DHSoWhite all at once—trends already well underway in many North American institutions, if not globally as well. The call for papers that generated this special issue aimed to develop a modest inventory of what historians of empire are doing to take advantage of new methods of research and representation in the wake of the revolution in digital technology. The emphasis was on digital “methods” rather than digital “humanities” per se—in part we want to emphasize tools as vehicles for asking, answering, and generating historical questions rather than as agents of “blunt instrumentalism” “or unreflective computerization,” let alone as drivers of research, narratives, and arguments about imperial history.¹⁰ Among the questions I asked contributors to consider were: who is using what tools and to what ends? How do methods change, if at all, when historians have access to big data sets, visualization programs, story-mapping software, and even coding innovations? What, indeed, counts as a digital tool or method? What kinds of questions about imperial power and resistance can be asked and answered via these new technologies? Which cannot? How have histories of indigenous and colonial peoples in the context of colonial rule been enhanced—or not—by such tools? What happens to histories of race and class, and sexuality and gender, labor, mobility, and the body, when the digital is ascendant? What is the relationship of current work in the digital field to older models and more recent trends, including but not limited to the so-called new imperial history? We have only begun to scratch the surface of these questions, and as my opening remarks suggest, I myself am skeptical about the degree to which today’s new tools and methods move us further, perforce, toward

¹⁰ Dennis Tenen, “Blunt Instrumentalism: On Tools and Methods,” in *Debates in the Digital Humanities* 2016, ed. Matthew K. Gold and Lauren F. Klein (Minnesota, 2016), 83–91 and Jeffrey M. Binder, “Alien Reading: Text Mining, Language Standardization and the Humanities,” *ibid.*, 210.

decolonizing imperial and world histories at all scales.¹¹ It is worth continuing to rigorously debate and vigorously argue over the contemporary implications of “data geopolitics”—or in this case, the imperial politics of knowledge production—for our practice.¹² That is an ongoing debate I hope our work here will help sustain.

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¹¹ For a politics of the possible, in contrast, see Dorothy Kim, “How to #Decolonize DH: Actionable Steps for an Antifascist DH,” in *Disrupting the Digital Humanities*, ed. Kim and Jesse Stommel (punctum books, 2018), 479–497.

¹² For “data geopolitics” see Mark Jarzombek, *Digital Stockholm Syndrome in the Post-Ontological Age* (Minnesota, 2016), 12.