Introduction

Digital Literary Studies in the United States

It was also interesting to see, during the convention and after, a debate among the Twitter crowd about the label “digital humanities” and whether it was accurate or useful and how to get humanists, digital and otherwise, to talk more (or more usefully) to one another. A catchall phrase comes in handy—it’s hard to imagine the NEH’s establishing an Office of Cool Scholarship Done With Digital Tools—but it doesn’t do justice to the very different kinds of work done under that label. Maybe the term is just a placeholder, and the day is not far off when people won’t feel the need to make a distinction between the humanities and the digital humanities.


Scholars who self define as digital humanists joke that any public discussion on digital humanities will inevitably turn to the question: “What are the digital humanities?” Digital humanists spend what seems to be an inordinate amount of time discussing, defining, and explaining what, in many ways, is an amorphous, fluid area of study. Books, articles, blog posts, tweets, conferences, and conference papers that define “digital humanities” have grown ex-
ponentially, and so common is the query that Matthew Kirschenbaum has called such “what is” essays “genre pieces.” While the digital humanities as an area of scholarly inquiry might appear to be a recent invention, utilizing computing technology to answer humanistic questions is often dated to 1946 and Father Busa’s *Index Thomisticus*, a concordance program. Early digital work was conducted on mainframe computers using punch cards or paper tape and focused on concordance development, authorship studies, and linguistic analysis. As digital technology applications for humanities materials developed in the 1980s and 1990s, driven in large part by increased use of microcomputing and the emergence of the World Wide Web, scholars adopted the term humanities computing to describe their work. By the early 1990s, humanities computing was well established with growing numbers of humanities computing departments, centers and institutes, specialized journals, an annual conference, and three distinct scholarly organizations: the Association for Literary and Linguistic Computing, the Association for Computers and the Humanities, and the Society for Digital Humanities/Société pour l’étude des médias interactifs. Focused on “information technology as a tool and written texts as a primary object of study (for linguistic analysis),” according to Patrik Svensson, humanities computing was a cohesive scholarly pursuit. The World Wide Web (web or WWW), however, would change everything and set the stage for the current tensions in the field. In her comprehensive history of humanities computing, Susan Hockey argues that at the onset of the web, “some long-term humanities computing practitioners had problems in grasping the likely impact of the Web in much the same way as Microsoft did.” In Hockey’s analysis, scholars saw the web as a space devoid of serious activity and unable to support scholarship, but she also, and perhaps more importantly, predicts the fissures in humanities computing that would explode in contemporary conflict. Instead of ensuring a cohesive humanities computing community, who shared a good deal of agreement
on technique and methodology, the web spurred a new set of users who exploited the web’s flexibility and openness to diversify scholarly questions and methodologies, often viewed as a direct assault on scholarly rigor and exclusiveness.

By the mid-2000s, humanities computing was declining as a term of choice, with Willard McCarty’s *Humanities Computing*, published in 2005, signaling the last substantive use of the term. During the same year, the Association for Literary and Linguistic Computing, the Association for Computers and the Humanities, and the Society for Digital Humanities/Société pour l’étude des médias interactifs merged into the Alliance of Digital Humanities Organizations (ADHO), and humanities computing became digital humanities (DH), the term that John Unsworth had coined for the 2004 *Blackwell Companion to Digital Humanities*. Regardless of the acceptance and use of the term digital humanities, a working definition remains elusive even to those that call themselves digital humanists. It is not clear whether the digital humanities are a field, a technique, or a trend, or if such definitions are antithetical to the scholarly project. Scholars argue over whether the digital humanities should emphasize digital building or theorizing and contest hack versus yack. The metaphor of the big tent, where all those interested in scholarly uses of technology might reside, continues to be a point of contention, leaving some, such as Matthew Kirschenbaum, to see the term digital humanities as tactical rather than informational.

This book is written as the digital humanities become increasingly visible, with articles about DH appearing in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, increasing numbers of jobs posted in the MLA job list, and a growing number of DH centers across the United States. Yet at disciplinary conferences, college and university meetings, in social media, and in trade publications, such as *Inside Higher Ed*, the “what is DH” question continues to be voiced. This monograph does not seek to provide one definition of digital humanities. Instead, the project suggests that digital humani-
ties is, in many ways, a living term, ever evolving, ever shifting in response to particular pressures of scholarship, the academy, and the individual. Accordingly, the project traces the various theoretical and methodological branches of literary digital humanities to reveal how seemingly unrelated literary movements have shaped current digital humanities practice. Many of the early books on digital humanities have focused on the breadth of the digital humanities, arguing that digital humanities is an inclusive form that is able to be all to all fields. While such a tactic serves the political purpose of making digital humanities indispensable, it obscures the impact of practitioners from various disciplinary backgrounds who have shaped technology to address their scholarly investigations. This book responds to the need for a coherent and focused analysis of the impact of discipline on the emergence of digital literary studies. I hope that this approach leaves the way open for others to think through digital practices in related areas such as game studies, new media studies, postcolonial studies, history, architecture, information studies, computer science, language studies, and archaeology.

I limit this study to the American academy, though I am fully aware that digital humanities in America did not develop in a vacuum. Professional organizations cross national boundaries, scholars move to jobs in different countries, and ideas are shared internationally. Yet formulations of digital work are constructed by national contexts shaped, in part, by funding and reward systems. Many digital projects in the United States, for example, have been supported by grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) Start Up program. Focused on technological innovation, NEH Start Up grants have spurred the production of interoperable digital tools and technological standards. In other countries, such as Canada, larger digital research budgets and larger grant payouts have encouraged the pursuit of broader projects with huge collaborative teams. Additionally, reward systems have impacted the types of projects that scholars
are willing to pursue. In countries where grant monies are necessary to secure tenure and promotion, digital humanities tends to be more prominent than in countries where grant funding is not valued. Digital projects that emphasize outreach and public impact are increasingly the norm in places like the United Kingdom, where funding models are driven by measurements that emphasize such criteria. Given the influence of the localized academic environment on the formation of digital humanities, it is pertinent to examine the practice within a particularized context.

In addition to situating digital humanities in its appropriate academic and national context, this project seeks to locate disciplinary influences on the construction of digital humanities. There is no doubt that the broader term digital humanities encompasses multiple areas of scholarly inquiry—from literary studies, to linguistics, to classics, to history and more—but the reality of the situation is that the institution that fuels scholarship—the academy—has not made much progress away from traditional disciplinary structures. The impact of interdisciplinary groups, departments, and scholarship is growing, but most scholars continue to be trained and practice in a disciplinary manner. *Traces of the Old, Uses of the New: The Emergence of Digital Literary Studies* grapples with these crucial issues by tracing the historical development, theoretical roots, and emergent trends of what is now being called digital humanities within literary studies. Conflicts within the larger digital humanities are revealed to be driven by long-held disciplinary understandings of approaches, methodologies, and values. Fields “do” scholarship differently. Digital humanities scholars have long operated under the false conception that new technological approaches and collaborative research negate the particularities of disciplinary training. This project seeks to expose the naturalized assumptions of interdisciplinarity in digital humanities.

A number of early published volumes discuss digital humanities, such as the *Blackwell Companion to Digital Humanities, Black-
well Companion to Digital Literary Studies, Willard McCarty’s *Humanities Computing*, and Jerome McGann’s *Radiant Textuality: Literature after the World Wide Web*. In such a rapidly changing area of inquiry, these works, which have served us well, are becoming dated. Luckily we are seeing an explosion of volumes focused on defining digital humanities, including *Understanding Digital Humanities*, edited by David M. Berry; Steven E. Jones’s *The Emergence of Digital Humanities; Literary Studies in the Digital Age: An Evolving Anthology*, edited by Kenneth M. Price and Ray Siemens; *Digital Humanities*, edited by Anne Burdick et al.; *Defining Digital Humanities: A Reader*, edited by Melissa Terras et al., among others. Some digital humanities volumes have focused on specific issues related to digital humanities, as do Susan Hockney’s *Electronic Texts in the Humanities: Principles and Practice; Electronic Textual Editing*, edited by Lou Burnard, Katherine O’Brien O’Keeffe, and John Unsworth; and Dan Cohen’s *Hacking the Academy*; conflicts within the field, such as *Debates in the Digital Humanities*, edited by Matthew K. Gold; or specific techniques of analysis, such as Matthew L. Jockers’s *Macroanalysis: Digital Methods and Literary History*. Perhaps unique in digital humanities is that print scholarship is beginning to wield less power in shaping the area as blog posts, tweets, listserv discussions, and digital projects gain attention. Alan Liu’s influential post “Where Is Cultural Criticism in the Digital Humanities?,” John Unsworth’s early “What Is Humanities Computing and What Is Not?,” Matthew Kirschenbaum’s “What Is Digital Humanities and What’s It Doing in English Departments?,” or Bethany Nowviskie’s illuminating “Eternal September of the Digital Humanities” have all made crucial interventions in digital humanities. As the digital humanities writ large is shaped by a growing body of criticism, the exploration of specialized inquiry areas gains momentum. In addition to the above essays, full-length volumes including Daniel Cohen and Roy Rosenzweig’s *Digital History: A Guide to Gathering, Preserving, and Presenting the Past on the Web* and my
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coedited volume *The American Literature Scholar in the Digital Age* become a necessary means of contouring our understanding of a dynamic area of scholarly inquiry.

*Traces of the Old, Uses of the New: The Emergence of Digital Literary Studies* analyzes the emergence of digital literary scholarship over the last 25 years. This project uses the scholarship and products of the digital turn to define historical and emergent trends; I analyze a range of materials including digital editions, digital archives, etexts, scholarly writing, digital artifacts (including tools and metadata), and interviews with key players in the field. While some critics have argued that digital humanities are an outlier to literary studies, this project reveals that many of the theoretical elements of literary studies are retained in digital literary studies. My project defines and analyzes four dominant areas of work in what I call digital literary studies: the digital edition form, the digital archive form, cultural studies approaches, and literary data approaches. I define each of these areas as foundational for digital literary studies and argue that these forms function within a continuum of production, with new techniques, such as datamining, gaining prestige within the field while never fully eliding earlier practice, such as the digital edition.

In chapter 1 I trace the foundational form of digital literary production, the digital edition. “The Rationale of Holism: Textual Studies, the Edition, and the Legacy of the Text Entire” argues that the centrality of the digital edition form that emerged from the combative field of textual studies transferred key ideas regarding texts and materiality to digital literary studies. Key concepts examined in the chapter include a distrust of the digital environment, the holistic text, and the desire for editorial control of the text. While textual studies has given digital literary studies an infrastructure through which we might represent the material text, our textual studies roots have also transferred the unfortunate legacy of the unfair representation of editing as uncritical and mechanical. Further, the editorial emphasis on purity and
the inherited problematic treatment of issues of diversity has impacted the way in which digital literary studies has selected materials to digitize. Textual studies work has not neatly transferred into the digital nor has textual studies remained the dominant mode within digital literary studies, but the impact of textual studies on the field is undeniable.

Chapter 2, “The Era of the Archive: The New Historicist Movement and Digital Literary Studies,” tracks the archive fever that overtook digital humanities in the 1990s, arguing that the digital archive was a contradictory form that sought to create an idealized archive. Work by Jerome McGann, Kenneth M. Price, Alan Liu, Martha Nell Smith, and others is examined to determine how specific tenets of new historicism, such as the use of an anecdote within a complex social system, form the digital archive model. Using examples from digital archives and print scholarship, I argue that the digital archive imagines the text within an expansive yet holistic system, with the textual materials designed to interact with a wide range of cultural materials. Tracking the rise of open access, web delivered archives, the chapter reveals the self-reflexivity of archive construction with particular attention to TEI/XML encoding approaches. Examination of theorists including Clifford Geertz, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault exposes the impact of new historicist thinking on digital literary studies treatment of power structures, canon, and apparatus. The archival turn in American digital literary work has created a theoretical foundation for digital literary studies and allowed for the development of standardized approaches. I end the chapter by examining the growing tension between digital literature and digital history over the treatment of archives and argue that this tension is a prime example of the difficulty scholars have in defining the umbrella term of digital humanities.

recovery projects, the chapter focuses on activist, small-scale projects that used digitization to expand what such scholars saw as an outmoded new critical literary canon that excluded work by women, people of color, queers, and others. Embedded within contemporary understandings of the Internet, projects utilized entry-level technology skills to produce digital archives and curated, hyperlinked sites to digitize texts that would expand the canon. Concurrent with individual scholarly production was the heyday of etext centers, focused on producing a large volume of digitized cultural materials. Examining early digital recovery projects including Alan Liu’s *Voice of the Shuttle*, Jean Lee Cole’s *The Winnifred Eaton Digital Archive*, the *Women Writers Project*, Glynis Carr’s *The Online Archive of Nineteenth-Century U.S. Women’s Writing*, and others, the chapter uncovers that not only has the early wave of small recovery projects slowed but projects have begun to disappear. I interrogate the impact of infrastructure, community, technological standards, and economics on the construction of digital literary canons, providing a roadmap for the construction of a broader digital literary canon.

Chapter 4, “Data and the Fragmented Text: Tools, Visualization, and Datamining or is Bigger Better?,” focuses on tool development, visualization, and datamining, three crucial subareas of the interpretive bent of digital studies. Current work on visualizing and datamining is examined in the chapter, with careful attention to optical character recognition (OCR) and data sets. The chapter argues that there is an unresolved and longstanding division between interpretive and representational uses of technology within digital literary studies, particularly in the development of tools. Scholars interested in constructing tools to support digital work recognize that tool development is expensive and difficult and often leads to highly idiosyncratic, nonextensible, and unsustainable tools. The alternative, generalized tools, raises questions of use value, as many tools are not designed to address humanities concerns. Examining a variety of tools, such as Wordseer, Juxta, and the Versioning Machine, and datamin-
ing projects, such as Lauren Klein’s work on James Hemings and Matthew Wilkens’s analysis of Civil War American fiction, I argue that while such approaches are in their infancy, the possibilities are myriad. Instead of rejecting algorithmic approaches as flawed, we must focus on the construction of data in tandem with experimental algorithmic manipulations.

In the book’s final chapter, “Notes on the Future of Digital Literary Studies,” I consider the ways in which digital literary studies might come to terms with its history. Rejecting the hackneyed “what are the digital humanities” genre, the chapter revisits each of the formative fields discussed in the book to speculate how we might address current conflicts within the field. The chapter examines the current contours of debate in digital literary studies, with particular attention to formations of inside/outside and resistance to the field by traditional literary scholars. With attention to current flash points of digital literary studies including the hack/yack divide, concerns regarding inclusivity, and the so-called innate conservatism of digital humanities, the chapter calls for a return to activist digital innovation that is divergent, not convergent.

It is crucial that scholars map the field of digital literary studies. My analysis of the development of digital literary studies itself owes much to new historicism, which theorizes that movements should be contextualized within power structures and examines the impact of theoretical, economic, social, and historical impacts on scholarship. By examining the evolution of what we have come to call digital literary studies within such contexts, we might better understand how the form has both shifted and maintained certain conceptions of text, literature, and scholarship. It is my hope that this volume will encourage interest in the emergence of digital scholarship and that others will choose to map technology applications within their area of expertise.