Notes on the Future of Digital Literary Studies

As the worldview of code assumes comparable importance to the worldviews of speech and writing, the problematics of interaction between them grow more complex and entangled.


The rhetoric of these statements (which could easily be multiplied) is not one of reform, but of revolution. As Mark Sample puts it, “It’s all about innovation and disruption. The digital humanities is really an insurgent humanities.” The project is insurgent in relation, first, to the present exclusionary structures of access and accreditation and, second, to the hegemony of global capitalism of which those structures are an extension. Digital humanities, declares the Manifesto, “have a utopian core shaped by its genealogical descent from the counterculture-cyberculture of the ’60s and ’70s. This is why it affirms the value of the open, the infinite, the expansive [and] the democratization of culture and scholarship.”


This volume is designed to explore the ways in which digital literary scholarship has developed in the last twenty years, but it is not an answer to the perennial question “what are the digital
humanities?” Too much of the current work on digital scholarship has tried to define the field or practice within a contemporary framework, often insisting that the digital humanities are a revolutionary force to challenge all that comes before. In reality, the digital humanities owes a debt to a number of theoretical strains as outlined in this volume, and its ability to alter structures, whether theoretical or institutional, is always already contained by the very infrastructure in which it currently exists, the American academy. To argue that digital humanities are a brand new construction seems naïve at best, destructive at worst, as it creates an inaccurate binary that leads to increasingly hysterical readings of the digital humanities as usurper. As I revised this chapter, Adam Kirsch’s “Technology Is Taking Over English Departments: The False Promise of the Digital Humanities” made waves within the academic community with charges of the “obviously anti-humanistic manifestations of digital humanities.” As this project reveals, various humanistic traditions, theories, and practices do indeed construct the subfield of digital literary criticism, and the charge of antihumanism ignores a long history of borrowing and modifying from the traditional humanities practices, from the fields of textual studies, literary criticism, and cultural criticism. In this book, I separate what Matthew Kirschenbaum calls the “construct of a ‘digital humanities’” from the practice of digital humanities by scholars of literature. Instead of focusing on the institutional use of digital humanities or digital humanities as a (hopeful/destructive) political term, I am much more interested in the work of digital humanities as it has been and will be enacted. At the same time, this project recognizes that the future of digital literary studies is yet unmapped and various institutional, political, and economic forces may alter how the field develops in yet unknown ways. To this end, the project has focused on how current digital literary practice understands its relationship to what has come before and what will follow.

Accordingly, this book has resisted the notion of the digital
humanities as “big tent,” a field or practice or theory that is broad, expansive, and inclusive, instead insisting on specificity as a counter narrative to that of the sweeping representation of revolutionary change. While some may see the segmentation of digital humanities as counterproductive, I argue that digital humanities must be particularized because DH, as enacted, is so broad, diffuse, and flexible that a generalized definition does not adequately address the various digital approaches currently in use nor how certain humanities fields are being altered by digital practice. As Tom Scheinfeldt notes, “I believe an examination of our different disciplinary histories will advance even our interdisciplinary purposes: understanding what makes us distinctive will help us better see what in our practices may be of use to our colleagues in other disciplines and to see more clearly what they have to offer us.” While I agree with Scheinfeldt that we do need to develop an understanding of multiple histories, I want to resist seeing multidisciplinarity as merely a catalog of items that other disciplines might offer to digital practice, as such an approach suggests cooperation and exploitation. A far more productive understanding of our collective histories is to identify the borders of practice and to look for disciplinary overlaps that benefit all partners.

Digital literary studies, as I have defined the field in this volume, is constructed from textual studies, new historicist theory, cultural studies theory, and computational applications, each of which compose the theoretical framework for our current practice. Initial digital edition production utilized book technologies to become the first visible form in digital literary studies, and digital edition production—from the recently launched Scholarly Editing, which features “small” editions, to the digital conversion of long-standing print editorial projects, such as the Digital Donne: The Online Variorum—remains a cornerstone of contemporary scholarship. Textual studies and book history have given us theoretical structures and methodologies by which we might understand technologies of production, approaches we might borrow
from print production and apply to digital production, with exemplary projects like Matthew Kirschenbaum’s *Mechanisms: New Media and the Forensic Imagination* revealing the continuity between the seemingly disparate areas. At the same time, we have also inherited the unfortunate representation of textual studies as mechanistic and antitheoretical. Primarily associated with editing as an application, digital humanities insistence on more hack, less yack has been interpreted as a resistance to theoretical engagement in favor of application and left us open to charges of “DH as a refuge from theory.” Regardless of a clear tradition of theoretical engagement within textual studies and the practice of editing, some, like Richard Grusin, condemn digital humanists of creating an “invidious distinction between making things and merely critiquing them.” As we move forward, it is important to reveal how critiques of digital humanities as antitheoretical are misreading what are actually deep theoretical roots that are derived from textual studies.

New historicism has taught us how to situate our object of study within a social structure, whether the object of study is a computer program and its interaction with the user, a digital object within a larger network, or digital humanities within the larger context of literary studies. We might locate the digital humanist fascination with institutional power structures as a crucial legacy sprung from new historicism. As new historicists examined the complexities of power in the historical moment, current digital humanists often examine power structures within the academic institution. Unfortunately, the digital humanists’ critique of institutional structures is often seen as an attack on the humanities. For example, many essays in the special issue of *differences*, “In the Shadows of the Digital Humanities,” charge current digital humanists with being complicit in the growing critique against the humanities and the larger American higher educational system. David Golumbia, for example, argues that “[w]ere they more concerned with the problems of ideology and more
conscious of its tenacity, DHers might see how uncomfortably close the doctrine they advocate is to many of the most extreme ideological attacks on higher education mounted the world over by the political right.”6 Grusin also asserts “that it is no coincidence that the digital humanities has emerged as ‘the next big thing’ at the same moment that the neoliberalization and corporatization of higher education has intensified in the first decades of the 21st century.”7 Such critiques are oddly reminiscent of charges levied against new historicism during the height of its popularity. Lee Patterson, for example, accused new historicism of “unintended conservatism.”8 Donald Pease charged new historicism with “linguistic colonialism.”9 These charges against new historicism are strangely familiar, echoing in much of the most charged condemnations of digital humanities. Walter Benn Michaels noted of anti-new historicist sentiment: “The debate over resistance and complicity is just a rerun of the old debate over the possibility of truly radical political change, a rerun made possible by the historicist appropriate of an essentially deconstructive model of political difference. Difference in deconstruction is crucially subversive, which is to say—translated to the level of culture—that differences within a culture must be understood as the difference of the culture from itself.”10 The digital humanities insistence on difference, difference in approach to scholarship, in types of methodologies, in the way that we do scholarship, is an active form of resistance to traditional academic hierarchies that many working in digital humanities find limiting. The critique of the humanities is not, as Columbia suggests, an alignment with cyberlibertarianism but rather an attack on what many digital humanists see as academia’s rigid hierarchy, the academy’s insistence on practices that are, at heart, antidemocratic, antimeritocratic, and exclusionary.

Despite the increasing centrality of digital humanities to many fields and to literature in particular, digital scholars continue to insist that they retain an outsider status in large part because they
want to see themselves as challenging exclusionary institutional practices. For example, blog writer bitnetted denies that DH scholars exert institutional power; “On the whole, DH people are not as structurally empowered within the academy as the theory leaders of the 80s and 90s were. That there are some senior ‘names’ in the field is great, but the field itself is still heterogenous [sic] and developing. As was pointed out in several sessions, many DH people are grad students, non TT, or staff. Those who are attempting to do such work from the TT are stressed about whether any of it will count towards T&P, especially if they are of the making or coding variety of digital humanists.” Lisa Spiro jokes that DHers as “in-crowd” is “an ironic label for a group of people who have long felt like misfits.” Others, such as Stefan Sinclair, argue that “so-called stars” are not really stars because they “are truly among the most humble and down-to-earth colleagues I can imagine. These are people who love doing their work and who spend an unbelievable amount of their time contributing altruistically to the community. These are people who volunteer huge amounts of time working behind the scenes on committees, advocating for the digital humanities at various levels, helping to provide support and expertise for other colleagues, mentoring junior colleagues formally and informally, and the list goes on.” The resistance to seeing digital humanists as those who have some sort of academic star quality or power in the profession has become the norm, ironic in the face of the increasing opportunities for those who are visible digital humanities scholars. Regardless of insistence by digital humanists that they are outsiders, it is abundantly clear that digital humanities has begun to exert power within traditional academic structures. Perhaps the best articulation of the way in which power and privilege works within the system comes from Kirschenbaum, who argues that while certain forms of technology can act as a “democratizer: the individual with a 4/4 load at an isolated teaching institution can wield influence in ways that would have been unthinkable in the theory-era,” DH stardom and
power “is not any less divorced from the real world balance of academic power, which (still) manifests in the form of jobs, grants, publications, invitations and all the rest of the apparatus.” We need critical attention to the fluid relationship of power structures and their relation to academic infrastructure, and we need DH scholars to be sensitive to how such power dynamics replicate privilege.

Current critiques couched as a battle between insiders and outsiders are unnuanced and potentially destructive forms of resistance to what could be productive dissention. For some, the resistance to critique comes because of what seems to be a lack of understanding about positionality. Roger Whitson, for example, says “movements like #transformDH (a group that has criticized digital humanities for its lack of attention to race, ethnicity, gender, class and sexuality) baffle me . . . if my experience with the MLA is any indication, the digital humanities doesn’t need to be changed.” Whitson’s dismissal of #transformDH’s response to MLA lacks a critical positionality that replicates exclusionary practices. Much like those who continue to insist on the outsider status of DH, Whitson doesn’t recognize when he slips into a position of power or at least comfort from which others might continue to be excluded. Such concerns have also turned on the specter of race that continues to overlay discussions of who is in and who is out in digital humanities in increasingly uncomfortable, problematic ways. Reverberations of race thread through digital humanities writing, including Jean Bauer’s “Who You Calling Untheoretical.” Written in response to Natalia Cecire’s blog “When DH Was in Vogue; or, THATCamp Theory,” Bauer’s use of the phrase “who you calling” connects linguistically to accusations of racial impurity. As early as the nineteenth century, Southern apologist and plantation myth author Thomas Nelson Page used “Who you callin’ nigger” in his work In Ole Virginia. Page recirculates the phrase in Unc’ Edinburg and, throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the skewed grammati-
cal construction was used when charging a character with racial taint. The lack of critical awareness of the problematic historical legacy invoked by the phrase is particularly poignant when we recognize that the blog is a response to Cecire’s conscious play on “When the Negro was in Vogue,” a Langston Hughes essay critical of whites who frequented Harlem during the jazz age to view the exotic spectacle of blackness. The connection of impurity to those interested in shifting digital humanities work to discussions of race is by no means intentional racism but a product of a long cultural use of race to represent contagion. We should not be surprised to see such a treatment of race show up within such discussions, as the American academy is, at heart, connected to deep inequities based on race and class. Instead of attacking the individuals who have utilized such analogies, we need to embrace the chance to have engaged conversations that strengthen the work that we conduct.

In fact, the embrace of cultural studies criticism and what the field has taught us about power dynamics models must be integrated into digital humanities if we truly want revolutionary shifts in academic culture. If we imagine, as Alan Liu suggests, digital humanities as a “service” “advocating the humanities in its present moment of need,” then we might begin to envisage how to deconstruct power structures in the institute in which digital humanities resides, the university. In February 2010, Willard McCarty posted an analysis of a Yale graduate student conference, “The Past’s Digital Presence,” to the Humanist listserv. Quoting Ed Ayers, McCarty agreed that the conference might prove “a watershed event in the history of our field in the U.S.” McCarty’s comment drew numerous responses to Humanist. Some questioned if we should celebrate such initial explorations just because they were happening at an Ivy when scholars on the ground at places like Maryland, Virginia, Nebraska, and Kentucky, among others, have been working with digital humanities for years, often at great expense to their own careers. As Amanda
Gailey eloquently argues, “I view the late arrival of the Ivies as a worrisome indicator that DH will soon be locked down by the same tired socio-economic gatekeeping mechanisms that prevent many people with talent from succeeding at so many other academic disciplines . . . [I]t is quite possible that a hitherto unproven field, within which smart people not housed at the most selective and expensive universities could actually earn influence and rewards, is becoming less egalitarian.”

Gailey’s response to the conference is one which is worth taking seriously. If DH is going to effect change, then we must continually evaluate power dynamics. If we do not, then DH will be subsumed into the larger academic culture and the revolutionary impulse will be denied.

Even detractors of digital humanities recognize that technology has already made major changes in the study of humanistic thought and production of scholarly work. Production of the objects of study is increasingly digital, and clearly the mechanisms of our scholarly output, the presses that produce, say, monographs, are already responding to technological change. While we may bring our traditional methodologies and theories to bear on technologically produced humanities materials, we will also want to respond, in the way humanists have always responded, to the shifting landscape of cultural production. Much of what we are now able to do with algorithmic interpretation has never before been possible, yet there is much experimentation yet to occur. Instead of clinging to our old methods, it seems that humanists would be best served by experimental uses of new tools to expand the humanistic inquiry in which we have long been engaged.

Because the digital humanities continue to have such a long history of interaction with and derivation from recognizable humanistic models, it is surprising that DH is often seen as threatening and antihumanistic. It seems likely that the threat posed by DH stems from the institutional, structural changes that digital humanists advocate. Kirschenbaum highlights the ways by which digital humanists work differently than traditional humanists:
“. . . the digital humanities today is about a scholarship (and a pedagogy) that is publicly visible in ways to which we are generally unaccustomed, a scholarship and pedagogy that’s bound up with infrastructure in ways that are deeper and more explicit than we are generally accustomed, a scholarship and pedagogy that is collaborative and depends on networks of people and that lives an active, 24/7 life online.” Kirschenbaum closes his essay by asking: “Isn’t that something you want in your English department?”

But the very issues he points to, the very issues that make DH unique within the humanities—collaboration, real time scholarship, open access, restructuring of academic hierarchies—are exactly the structural and infrastructural points of tension with traditional humanists, the point of resistance for many in English departments. For many scholars, the more public the publication, the more suspicious the scholarly rigor of the work. Public blogs are accused of being CV filler rather than seen as disseminating our work to a broader public or, worse, selling out to a neoliberal plot of assigning use value to our scholarly production. As digital humanities makes inroads into traditional departments, conferences, journals, and fields, it becomes more and more apparent that the thing that is threatening about digital humanities work is not the work itself but how digital humanists choose to work. Creation of a digital text makes sense within a disciplinary framework but working in collaborative teams to produce multi-authored scholarship is a practice far afield from how most literary scholars work.

My participation in the 2011–2012 NINES/NEH Summer Institute on Evaluating Digital Scholarship made clear just where the tensions in the new working structures appeared. For participants in the institute, departmental and university administrators, forms that looked like traditional forms, such as digital journals or even articles and books analyzing digital tools or approaches, were acceptable modes of scholarship. The MLA likewise agrees that an electronic journal is “a viable and credible mode of scholarly production.” Of far greater con-
troversy are the types of work that don’t have direct analogues to what has been traditionally understood to be humanities scholarship. Digital humanities scholars, such as Bethany Nowviskie, have argued vigorously against the move to “evaluate the products of digital scholarship as if they can be mapped neatly to unary objects and established categories, such as journal articles or monographs,” but it is clear that many traditional humanities scholars continue to look for print analogues to digital objects. Equally problematic is the suggestion that digital projects are best valued by the publication of an essay or book discussing the project, another way to bypass a disciplinary culture shift in assessment. Resistance to valuing the tool, database, or code as scholarship in and of itself puts an extra burden on scholars working with digital production.

In 1989, R. G. Potter called for a revision of literary studies; “What we need is a principled use of technology and criticism to form a new kind of literary study absolutely comfortable with scientific methods yet completely suffused with the values of the humanities.” We need to work together, in the shared spaces, to develop working models that best articulate our hopes. If we do indeed believe in digital humanities as transformative then we must continue to excavate and to rebuild the structures that underpin our work and our community. Our scholarly work at the intersections of technology and humanities is important, but it is our work that challenges power structures that is crucial. DH might shift exclusionary practices that have long run roughshod over the best impulses of academia, but to shift practices we cannot become what we battle.