The history departments of the 1950s were hardly bastions of diversity. Stocked by white men and centered on political history and its most prominent figures, they reflected broader trends in the academy in the pre–civil rights era. But in the 1960s, a movement known as the New Social History, led by scholars looking to retell history from below, emerged to produce a torrent of research that challenged the traditional boundaries of historical actors worthy of study. As articulated most famously by E. P. Thompson in *The Making of the English Working Class*, this movement aimed to save previously unrecognized groups from the “enormous condescension of posterity” (12). Following Thompson, working-class communities, immigrant groups, African American citizens, and women, among other marginalized groups, soon became the primary focus of historical inquiry. Central to this project was a reexamination of the sources that facilitated such research. The history of “Great Men” was driven by large print archives and the writings and correspondence of political and military figures. Conversely, the raw materials of the social historian were rooted in oral history, personal collections, community newspapers, court records, and other ephemeral sources. This reassessment of source material was a critical first step toward carving out the legacies of the figures previously ignored by history.

As a social historian whose work has become increasingly digital, I frequently see the parallels between the historical trajectory of my own discipline and that of digital humanities. Just as in history, digital humanities has for years been wrestling with inequities regarding gender, race, and ethnicity in terms of both projects and participation—inequities that have been detailed in different ways by a variety of scholars (Bailey; McPherson; Earhart, “The Diverse History”; Posner). However, a move toward a more representative digital humanities must also involve an analysis of the types of sources that guide projects, similar to the analysis that sparked the New Social History. The digital humanities thrives on abundance; large, open datasets and massive text-mining experiments have become the calling card of the
largest, most well-known grant-funded projects. Given the premium placed on big data, however, DH practitioners have fallen back into the trap of privileging valorized subjects who simply left an abundance of artifacts behind. In a sense, the old politics of who deserved to be historicized has become the new politics of who deserves to be digitized.

Indeed, the politics and economics of digitization present some of the largest obstacles to creating diverse collections. The collection policies of many libraries and archives often reinforce the underrepresentation of certain historical figures and communities. For example, the Seeley G. Mudd Manuscript Library at Princeton University uses a “targeted digitization” (Callahan) process to guide some of their digitization efforts. Based on Google Analytics data culled from their websites, they identify materials that are of interest to the public and digitize corresponding materials. Keeping patrons in mind is critical for designing collection practices, but it should also be clear how following patron interest alone would privilege the most well-known events and figures. This phenomenon is only magnified in the current era of widespread austerity, when every line item in a budget must be justified by use.

But one of the enduring lessons of social history is that the availability of source material (or lack thereof) often determines the projects’ result. As Amy Earhart has shown, the democratic promise of web-based projects has gone largely unfulfilled as a result of limited efforts to diversify the “digital canon” (“Can Information Be Unfettered?”). As archivists, librarians, researchers, and practitioners, we must understand that choosing what gets digitized is an inherently political decision, and at stake, as one public historian noted, is “what counts as part of our cultural heritage and who gets to decide” (Rizzo).

A critical part of any shift must also involve a creative reimagining of existing sources. We are beginning to see the payoffs that result from revisiting older texts and datasets, such as Tobias Higbie’s “Situations and Relations,” which employs a digitized version of the 1925 American Labor Who’s Who in order to visualize networks in the American labor movement relating to educational background, geographic linkages, familial heritage, and a host of other features.

The initial findings of Higbie’s research point to connections between workers, labor organizations, and educational institutions that were previously obscured. A similar approach might be employed with sources that focus on racial injustice or the histories of marginalized groups. Texts like Pauli Murray’s 1951 States’ Laws on Race and Color and Charles Spurgeon Johnson and Lewis Wade Jones’s 1941 Statistical Atlas of Southern Counties, which focus on cataloging Jim Crow segregation, economic inequality, and state violence, are other rich documents with a firm sense of geography and spatial relationships—precisely the types of sources that should prompt our digital imaginations.

Digital humanists could also stand to learn by emulating some of the earliest digital history projects, which focused on digitizing and analyzing nontraditional sources. While recent discussions have sought to underscore the differences
between digital history and digital humanities (Robertson), it is also clear that there is considerable overlap between the two fields. Many of the early digital history projects, led by James Gregory, Edward Ayers, Roy Rosenzweig, Stephen Brier, Joshua Brown, Jan Reiff, James Grossman, and Ann Durkin Keating, among others, were driven by an impulse to build digital archives and scholarship around the experiences of working people and individual communities. For example, Ayers and the staff at the University of Richmond’s Digital Scholarship Lab largely emphasized Southern history, and Virginian history in particular—an emphasis that continues to this day. They have leveraged their resources to create projects that actively address regional concerns. The Los Angeles Aqueduct Digital Platform (LAADP) at UCLA serves a similar purpose. Designed as a collaboration between the UCLA Library and Metabolic Studio, the platform functions as both an archive and a source of scholarship on the subject. I led the capstone project for the platform, working with a team of undergraduate students to produce a series of articles on the aqueduct’s history using DH tools. The team used a social history framework to tell narratives of communities that have been adversely affected by the aqueduct’s construction, resulting in contributions that used disparate source material to place Native American communities, immigrant groups, and working-class towns at the center of controversies over water rights in Southern California.

As the Aqueduct project makes clear, digital humanists should actively pursue digitizing additional nontraditional sources in an effort to produce projects that pair diverse sources with DH methods. At the same time, there also needs to be a discussion over the occasional discord between nontraditional sources and core DH methods. Some nontraditional sources can be easily analyzed using historical GIS, text mining, and network visualization tools. But a significant number remain incompatible with these tools. Off-the-shelf DH tools are most successful when working with homogeneous sources, which are precisely the types of sources that are in short supply when working with marginalized groups and actors. Short-lived community newspapers, handwritten notes, personal photo collections, pamphlets, and various types of ephemeral sources guide this type of work. These sources are often fragmented and rarely extensive. It is only when they are paired alongside one another that a more comprehensive narrative became possible. And yet, most DH tools do not allow for such pairings.

While digital humanists must continue to work toward combining core methods with more diverse sources, we must also make space for alternative approaches. As Amy Earhart has noted in her blog devoted to the history of digital humanities, digital projects centered on diverse subjects have a long history (“The Diverse History”). This legacy continues with a wide array of digital projects devoted to diverse communities. For example, The LatiNegrxs Project, hosted on Tumblr, uses a combination of media, historical ephemera, and news stories to portray the complexity of the African diaspora and black identity. The AfroCrowd Wikipedia project carries a distinctly public mission, actively recruiting contributors to
narrow the racial gap among Wikipedia editors. These are precisely the types of projects that take a creative view of source material and point to the diverse history of these communities, but they often go unmentioned in the most high-profile discussions on the digital humanities. As Moya Bailey has pointed out, we should be “meeting people where they are” and not just creating space “at an already established table.” Just as social history opened the doors to the methods and sources that were most suitable to the subject matter they sought to bring to light, we must therefore take a broader view of digital humanities that is not limited to text mining, data visualization, and other such valorized methodologies.

In a 1985 roundtable discussion that reflected on the significance of social history, Raphael Samuel zeroed in on what gave the field its impact: “its oppositional character.” Social history was intended as a disruption in terms of both content and method. Similar phrases have been employed to describe the digital humanities.

The evolution of social history thus provides an interesting parallel, one that shows a possible path toward a more inclusive relationship between source material and scholarship. Digital humanities is the beneficiary of an energy and enthusiasm borne out of new technology and the potential to provide new analytical lenses for the humanities. However, if the field continues to emphasize a particular methodological scope and does not reflect on the limitations of extant source material, its ultimate reach will be limited.

NOTES

1. In a 2014 article, Misty De Meo explored the limits of digitization amid widespread cuts to the Canadian national archives. Beyond presenting various staffing and workflow challenges, she also noted that libraries and archives tend to funnel limited funds toward digitizing collections that have the broadest appeal. As she notes, these strategies open the door to “erase the histories of marginalized groups while privileging well-documented pop history such as wars.”

2. See Tobias Higbie, “Situations and Relations,” http://socialjusticehistory.org/projects/networkedlabor/?p=38. Other recent projects at UCLA and the University of Richmond’s Digital Scholarship Lab have used similar sources to creatively retell the history of the labor movement, water rights, redlining, and emancipation. See http://digital.library.ucla.edu/aqueduct/; http://dsl.richmond.edu/projects/.

3. James Gregory has produced a series of digital history websites devoted primarily to the history of labor activism in the Pacific Northwest. For a complete list, see http://faculty.washington.edu/gregoryj/. Edward Ayers’s The Valley of the Shadow project was among the first digital history projects, examining two communities during the Civil War era. See http://valley.lib.virginia.edu/. Roy Rosenzweig, Joshua Brown, and Stephen Brier collaborated on Who Built America? Dedicated to the working-class history of the United States, this multimedia project consisted of two CD-ROMs, a History Matters website, and

4. This is particularly true for GIS, data visualization, and text mining, which thrive on relative uniformity in datasets. The scattered nature of most social history sources is not amenable to these types of applications. In many cases, DH applications can also be incompatible with the cultural practices of marginalized communities. Projects aimed at correcting some of these issues are still relatively scarce. One example is the Mukurtu Project, a custom CMS designed specifically for indigenous communities looking to control the protocols and dissemination of their cultural and historical artifacts. See http://mukurtu.org/.

5. A Storify post by Adeline Koh highlighted the breadth of digital projects being undertaken on race and ethnicity—and many of these projects are led by women and people of color.

6. As William Pannapacker has pointed out, there has been a growing rift in the digital humanities that funnels prominence to a limited number of institutions and researchers. This is deeply tied to funding and major grant programs that have had a spotty record of funding diverse projects and institutions. As Amy Earhart has highlighted, from 2007–2010, a critical boom period in digital humanities, relatively few of the National Endowment of Humanities Start-Up Grants went to projects centered on diverse texts or communities (“Can Information Be Unfettered?”). See http://www.chronicle.com/blogs/brainstorm/pannapacker-at-mla-digital-humanities-triumphant/30915.


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