Lowriding through the Digital Humanities

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Note: The title of this piece is shamelessly borrowed from Barbara Noda’s “Lowriding Through the Women’s Movement,” a piece which creatively addresses the power a group made up of women of color could have on individuals during the women’s movement. Noda’s essay was published in This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color.¹

My “low rider” laptop is decorated with a 3-D decal of the Virgin of Guadalupe, the spiritual queen of Spanish-speaking America. It’s like a traveling altar, an office and a literary bank, all in one.
— Guillermo Gómez-Peña

Lowriders are customized automobiles with a specific aesthetic that first appeared in the United States southwest in the mid-to-late 1940s, a product of a southwestern Mexican American cul-

ture. Lowriders are also the individuals who make these modifications. In contrast to the jacked up “hot rods” raced by Anglos of the period, lowriders are cars modified to be low to the road. The point isn’t to speed, but to cruise as low and slow as possible, disrupting traffic. In this way, the lowriders resisted the period’s white youth culture and made their creators visible to each other’s gaze. Lowriding also functions as social practice, claiming and constructing specific spaces in streets and parks where lowriders can, as Ben Chappell writes, “cruise, display their rides, and socialize.” In digital humanities, a discipline that publishes quickly, this essay has been written slowly and with much modification since its frame began in 2011 in the comments of a series of #TransformDH blog posts.

There has been wonderful work recently on #TransformDH by the TransformDH collective discussing how racial/gender/sexual/disabled bodies in the academy are and always have been doing digital humanities work, calling on the digital humanities to be “center[ed] on the intersection of digital production and social transformation.” Yet, because hegemony constantly replicates the dominant discourse, there needs to be a consistent and constant engagement with issues of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, and able-bodiedness as its counter. To do discuss this hegemony, I’m going to fall back on Chicana feminist praxis, the construction of something new out of found objects, a hybrid writing of Gloria Anzaldúa’s theory of Nepantla, locating myself between Chicana studies and the digital humanities. I speak from that in-between space with the hope that from this self-situated ethnography some insight into my concerns may

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3 Ibid., 3.
4 See #TransformDH (blog), http://transformdh.org/.
come. I use autoethnography to specifically discuss issues and effects of racial absence in the digital humanities community and what the costs of that may be. This piece begins to discuss how the discourse surrounding racial and racialized bodies and their absence in digital humanities spaces replicates the discourse surrounding the invisibility/absence of women of color from second-wave feminism. Much as American literature and feminism are haunted by race, issues of race and hegemony are the ghost in the machine of the digital humanities.⁶

Those who think Twitter is a waste of time, as opposed to it being a time-waster, are failing to see its potential. Or perhaps they’re not following the right people. Twitter is the main way I keep up on what’s going on in two areas: digital humanities and ethnic studies, especially Chicana and Latinx studies. My point of entry into both of these online communities is through Twitter, though in the case of ethnic studies, these areas also reflect my disciplinary background and my areas of research: Chicana feminist textual communities and editorship. Both the DH and Chicana Twitter streams are very active, some days more than others, but even so, more than I can read most days. Both use hashtags to discuss important issues, though Chicana studies somewhat less often than DH. Twitter is also the intersection of my Chicana studies classes work with the digital world and Latinx artists and authors as my students annotate their reading and viewing through their use of tweets and course hashtags.

*I say
My typewriter sticks in the wet.
I have been using the same ribbon
Over and over and over again.*⁷

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⁷ Cherrie Moraga, “It’s the Poverty,” in Loving in the War Years: lo que nunca pasó por sus labios, 62–64 (Boston: South End Press, 1983), 62.
In 2011, as I struggled with the final revisions of my dissertation between adjuncting gigs, feeling the absence of intellectual community, I found academic Twitter. Although I had been active in online communities going back to Usenet alt.* groups in the mid-late 1990s, except for a little work on a department listserv, my online communities never intersected with my academic ones. Questions of why should probably be reserved for the digital equivalent of psychoanalysis (would that be blogging?). However, by the end of 2011, I had been online as a Chicana doctoral student/recent PhD for more than a year. I had engaged with an online community of Chicanos, of other academics, of Doctor Who fans (communities that frequently overlapped). I had also participated in creating a hashtag—#AztlanReads—as a response to the general lack of knowledge about Chicanx authors and books. It took on a life of its own and become a small but vocal movement as a website and then anthology. Being part of this made me imagine how and where the fields of digital humanities and digital pedagogy were intersecting with Chicanx studies specifically, and ethnic studies/critical race theory more generally. As such, I began to research the genealogies of digital humanities, seeking to find where it intersected with critical race theory and cultural studies.

Yes, we both agree I could use
A new ribbon. But it’s the poverty
The poverty of my imagination, we agree.
I lack imagination, you say.8

Because of this Twitter experience engaging with and in technology with my digital community, I attended the 2012 Modern Language Association (MLA) convention in Seattle with plans of branching out from attending mainly Chicanx panels and into this DH community I’d grown to (virtually) know through social media. I’m taking a long time telling this. It is because the memory is painful. The panels and workshops I attended were

8 Ibid., 62.
a shock. Not only because the work was so exciting, especially, for me, the pedagogy, the mapping and timelining and other amazing projects with the potential of involving our students in concrete and useful research. But because even at MLA, even at a literature conference, I had never experienced a stronger sense of being racially/ethnically other. The rooms, crowded to bursting, were visibly, notably white spaces. This was a bit jarring, but what was even more so was that no one was talking about this. No one was asking where the brown people were — yet I knew, as Moya Bailey wrote in 2011, that people of color were engaged in digital work.⁹ Where were they? The absence of racialized bodies was un-noted. Let me underline that this was a kind space, welcoming to questions, eager to teach new skills. However the niceness, the civility, which Koh has noted and seems to underpin much of DH as a community, was one deployed in what seemed a racially homogeneous community, whose very homogeneity made this civility possible.¹⁰ The very issue of “civility” is a fraught one in Chicanx studies—a discipline born out of the decidedly “uncivil” protests of the Chicano Movement. For a recent example connected to the use of the term “civility” one can look at the 2014 protest directed at the leadership of the National Association of Chicana and Chicano Studies when it proposed as its conference theme “Exploring Civility within the Chicana & Chicano Studies Discipline” (Soto).¹¹ The degree to which Chicana/o studies has been civilized (or, to use a more coercive term, disciplined) and made part of the academy is seen by some as taking it away from its radical roots in the communities that agitated for its creation. How then to place Chicanx studies beside or bring it into a new discipline which sees itself as defined by civility?

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No. I lack language.
The language to clarify
My resistance to the literate.
Words are a war to me.
They threaten my family.\textsuperscript{12}

The degree to which I was unnerved by the whiteness of the MLA workshops is hard to overstate. On the one hand, here were all these wonderful ideas and practices, ways of thinking about literature and community and its intersection—merger even—with the digital that I had never considered. On the other, there was seemingly a lack of awareness of race, of the hegemonic replication of whiteness the bodies in the room represented, as though critical race studies did not exist or speak to this group. I left with nothing to say, unable to say anything, something that’s unusual as I’m generally a loud-mouthed sort of woman. I was unnerved to realize I had felt a fear of participating, of speaking. Most people understand that it’s hard being the only woman in a room of 50 to 100 men. For people of color, most of us know it’s just as hard to be the lonely only. That’s how I felt. Alone and painfully self-conscious, aware of my difference. When I’m one of the only, however kind and welcoming the environment, I experience physical and emotional stress. There’s a fear of asking questions lest I be seen as speaking for my race/culture and somehow reinforcing biases of ignorance. I left those DH sessions with the thought of attending the Chicana/Latinx/Asian American/African American literature sessions as a form of decompression.

\textit{To gain the word to describe the loss,}
\textit{I risk losing everything.\textsuperscript{13}}

But on leaving the DH sessions, I went and found coffee, sat in the hotel lobby and tried to sort out my thoughts and emotions.

\textsuperscript{12} Moraga, “It’s the Poverty,” 62–63.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 63.
On a personal level the moment was hard. After enduring the alienating damage of being one of a very few graduate students of color in my PhD program, I had been enfolded, and to an extent, healed, by Mujeres Activas en Letras y Cambio Social (MALCS), a Chicana/Latina/Indigenous association of women scholars and community activists who had welcomed me and my scholarship, including my budding DH work. Did I want to leap back into the world of unthinking micro and macro racial aggressions, especially with my limited conference time, and as an adjunct, paying for it with my own money? As a scholar of color there are few things as rare and wonderful as getting to be in a room with a multitude of scholars of color. Such spaces are precious. For me, there’s a feeling of intellectual safety, of being able to take risks without risking being found intellectually naive, or worse still, reflecting badly on all Chicanxs, of representing only myself. I feel I can be wrong, that we can build theoretical castles in the air, find their flaws, send them crashing down. Alexis Lothian, someone I knew from graduate school, came into view and kindly came over. I poured out what I experiences in my somewhat limited exposure to the digital humanities at MLA. She affirmed what I’d seen and felt and we began discussing issues of racial, gender and sexuality hegemony, the ablest rhetoric, within the DH community, something which is clear from her own work on marked bodies. It seems this feeling was something of the zeitgeist of the moment and soon tweets began to appear with the #TransformDH hashtag, beginning in 2011 at the American Studies Association (ASA) conference.

I may create a monster,  
The word’s length and body  
Swelling up colorful and thrilling  
Looming over my mother, characterized.  

15 Moraga, “It’s the Poverty,” 63.
There was and continues to be pushback, an insistence that DH is welcoming to all and has no need to transform itself or to be transformed, or, perhaps that this may have been case once, but now everything is better, is fine. In the five years since the Seattle MLA, I have witnessed the hostility and impatience that greets discussions of how DH could/should imbue itself with critical race theory and feminist praxis and that these theories be a starting point for critical DH work, not something added or stirred into projects already conceived. Enumerating DH projects by or about communities of color or women often substitutes for engaging with the white male hegemony (as well as neoliberal capitalism) being reproduced by and from our academic institutions into DH structures and communities. For me, these draw eerie parallels to the experience of women of color with second-wave feminism, constantly being told they would be welcome, if only they would come. And when feminists of color came, they experienced discomfort and hostility. Like white feminism, the digital humanities is haunted by racial discourse, which erupts like an uncivil poltergeist, highlighting awkwardness and discord. Yet there seems little willingness to change the shape of the discussion and be shaped by a different issues and voices.

*Her voice in the distance*

*Unintelligible illiterate.*

*These are the monster’s words*\(^{16}\)

At the same time, the potential for change, and my excitement for the field continues. A common metaphor between Chicana feminism and digital humanities is the notion of “making” the discipline, of building with one’s own hands. As a symbol in Chicana studies, this construction or building connects to Lorna Dee Cervantes poem, “Beneath the Shadow of the Freeway,” where readers, like the granddaughter are told to “trust only

\(^{16}\) Ibid., 63.
what [they] have built with my own hands.” This is such a powerful symbol that when Chicana studies wrote its own anthology, it drew its title, *Building with Our Hands*, from Cervantes’ poem. Likewise, lowriders take the old, late-model cars, modifying and remaking them bright as jewels so they can cruise through their neighborhoods, glitteringly visible. As Chicanas lowride through predominantly Anglo disciplines, there are constantly modifications—what Chela Sandoval calls the ever-changing “differential mode” feminism and consciousness of women of color. If DH can allow itself to be disrupted, to “go low and slow,” being modified by and learning from critical race theory to recognize and unsettle its privilege, starting from the position of the differential rather than bringing diversity in as an afterthought, demanding diversity of itself and its communities, this would go a long way in bridging these discourses. It means not waiting for scholars of color to find DH and ask about it, but going to them, understanding and listening to their theories and practices and discussing with them how the digital works in connection with the work they’re already doing. The price of admitting to not knowing or “getting” something, whether it is Python or critical race theory, is high and even dangerous and should not be taken lightly. If race could be the ghost in the machine of code, of data as some suggest, then maybe modifications to this machine can turn it into something wonderful and unimagined by its original makers.

Meanwhile, I find myself wanting. As a Chicana, I know I speak English only. As a digital humanist my computer is almost ten years old. My code is as stumbling and ungraceful as

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my Spanish, sticking like an old typewriter ribbon. I feel like Cherrie Moraga, trying to be a bridge and not being adequate to the task.
Bibliography


