Disrupting the Digital Humanities

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W(h)ither DH? New Tensions, Directions, and Evolutions in the Digital Humanities

Lee Skallerup Bessette

I will readily admit to feeling imposter syndrome while trying to write this. Who am I to stand here and tell you about Digital Humanities? I am, to a certain extent, an outsider looking into DH; I stand at a periphery; I hover around the margins. I was not trained in DH at any of the well known Centers (which include but are not limited to University of Virginia, MITH at the University of Maryland, MATRIX at Michigan State, the University of Nebraska (Lincoln), or The Center for History and New Media at George Mason University, or UCLA), nor am I a part of a growing group of new DH centers, projects, or initiatives popping up all over the country.¹ I’ve never “built” anything (which

¹ Links to their websites are, respectively: The Institute of Advanced Technology in the Humanities, University of Virginia, http://www.iath.virginia.edu/; Maryland Institute for Technology in the Humanities, University of Maryland, http://mith.umd.edu/; Center for Digital Humanities and Social Sciences, Michigan State University, http://www2.matrix.msu.edu/; Center for Digital Research in the Humanities, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, http://cdrh.unl.edu/; and the Center for History and New Media, George Mason University, http://chnm.gmu.edu/.
is a tension within digital humanities I will come back to): there are no databases or digital archives or tools or maps or digital editions or other pieces of born-digital scholarship that bear my name anywhere, in collaboration or otherwise.

Some context: I came to DH “late” and wholly by accident. I am a self-taught digital humanist. I was stuck in a contingent faculty position outside of my area of expertise at an institution with neither the capital nor the motivation to get involved in this growing trend both in research and teaching. This is not to say that my learning happened alone; in fact, it happened because of a vast community of fellow DH enthusiasts who tweeted, blogged, and made available through many different means and mediums their work within the field. And, they at first graciously tolerated my presence online, helped me to learn, mentored me, and supported me.

Because there was never a “Center” for me, both literally and figuratively, I have a different perspective to DH. I am particularly attuned to finding a lot of “stuff” on and around and about DH because I had to do it all myself. And because I was coming to the discipline unaware, I didn’t know to distinguish between the “big names” at the center and the smaller voices in the margins. Everyone that I encountered in DH was, to use Tom Scheinfeldt’s language, so nice, but I encountered them in a space that was itself, at that moment, still a marginal one, and relatively (but not unproblematically) democratizing: Twitter. I was exposed at once to the broad world of DH through a very select group of DH practitioners who were active on Twitter.

My perspective, or perhaps to use a more technical term, “filter bubble,” is one that is firmly informed by my embodied self; I provide this personal history for you because I think it is important that you know that this is just one perspective. I embody a position that stems from a very specific academic training and professional experience; I have a PhD in Comparative Literature and my research interests have been on major marginal authors, while I have worked largely in contingent positions at regional state institutions that primarily focus on teaching. My outsider status also allows me to listen in different ways and have people
reveal things that they might not otherwise. All of these perspectives inform my view of where DH is going.

Microhistories of DH

I plan to examine how microhistories inform our understanding of DH the various “centers”; and what draws DH participants to these gravitational areas. In her essay, “Literary History as Microhistory,” Heather Murray states that microhistory “is rooted in the attempt to incorporate peripheral or marginal events, figures, and communities into the historical picture.”2 It is “history with a human face: and that face is the face of the daily, the ordinary, the subaltern.”3 I believe that DH generally could use a more microhistorical approach given the current obsession with Big Data. In particular, as it relates to the subaltern, the more data we have does not necessarily make everything more visible but instead risks subsuming individual stories and subtle nuances, important for academic insight and critical reflection. DH has the possibility of telling both the “Big Stories” and also the microhistories in innovative and interesting ways.

Microhistory, primarily, looks to “focus on the anomalous rather than the typical.”4 Now, the question should be asked, is the history and evolution of DH the anomalous or is it the typical? And within the history of DH, what are the microhistories that are forgotten or are silenced? These are questions beyond the scope of this article, but it is important to keep questioning these master narratives, to remember that there are few typical stories these days, in either DH or in higher education more generally. This fragmentary nature, this lack of master narrative, in particular one with any kind of happy ending, can be disillusionsing and, let’s face it, depressing. But I think digital humanists have given us a potential alternative path to follow in order

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3 Ibid., 411.
4 Ibid., 415.
to make sense of these fragments, of these realities, by using the technology that many blame for this situation in the first place.

W(h)ither DH

I chose my title playfully, emphasizing my literary bent and love of language. If something can mean two or more things, or be easily misunderstood whether read or spoken… But this pun might strike you as being strange to be asking around DH. Wither the academic job market in the humanities—sure. Wither state support for public higher education—definitely. But wither DH? We know where DH is: It is everywhere! And it’s new now and funded! It’s at the MLA, the AHA, even the New York Times! There’s no wondering where DH is, or a pulling back from DH. It appears to be experiencing the opposite of withering; it would appear to be flourishing!

But, do we really know where DH is happening, or how it’s happening, or where to find DH? Or, rather, do we know where to put interdisciplinary programs and centers devoted to DH? The question has been raised over and over and over. The most well-known missive is from Matthew G. Kirschenbaum in an essay “What Is Digital Humanities and What’s It Doing in English Departments?” from 2010: “Whatever else it might be then, 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 are bound up with infrastructure in ways that are deeper and more explicit than we are generally accustomed to, a scholarship and pedagogy that are collaborative and depend on networks of people that live an active 24/7 life online. Isn’t that something you want in your English department?”

I can think of quite a few people who wouldn’t want DH in their departments given this description. 24/7 online? Public?

Think about infrastructure and technology? And then DH gets so big and so popular that you begin to get inflammatory (or click-bait) articles like “In the Near Future, Only Very Wealthy Colleges Will Have English Departments: Adapt (not publish) or perish” that appeared in The New Republic. Here is the opening paragraph: “Within a few decades, contemporary literature departments (e.g., English) will be largely extinct — they’ll be as large and vibrant as Classics departments are today, which is to say, not very active at all. Only wealthy institutions will be able to afford the luxury of faculty devoted to studying written and printed text. Communications, rhetoric/composition, and media studies will take English’s place. The change isn’t necessarily an evil to be decried but simply reflects how most people now generate and read narratives and text — they do it on digitally based multimedia platforms.”

This is what the rise in DH has given us: click-bait. Unfair click-bait that understands DH in a narrow way because they couldn’t “find” DH anywhere but English departments, but that nonetheless drives traffic and feeds into technological paranoia and perceived academic decline. This article is completely unfair to Classics, a discipline that is still a) a vibrant field and b) avid practitioners of a form of DH, where we can now 3D print artifacts, scan ancient documents, and read them using technology. They are using technology to invigorate their research and their teaching. But it should not be surprising that we have reached this stage.

So one side doesn’t want DH because, ugh, the digital, but the other side of that coin is that everyone wants DH: why should English have all the fun? Where should DH “live” within larger colleges and universities? Often there will be an academic discipline where DH is strong and the center or services spring up around that group of faculty and graduate students. One exam-

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6 James Pulizzi, “In the Near Future, Only Very Wealthy Colleges Will Have English Departments: Adapt (Not Publish) or Perish,” New Republic, 8 June 2014.
7 Ibid.
people would be the Center for History and New Media at George Mason. This is a major center located, clearly, within the field of history. But where does this leave professors and students from other disciplines? Now, this isn’t to say that CHNM hasn’t benefitted the entire field of DH, and they have developed a number of research tools that benefit any researcher, digital or not, such as the research and citation tool Zotero. And they have set best practices, supported numerous researchers and junior scholars, as well as been the incubator for ideas and approaches to DH and technology. But, massive academic turf wars have been waged over less. Then money, support, and new hires have been dangled in front of faculty members, chairs, and deans, well, of course people are going to fight over it and feel resentment over these decisions.

One solution—or maybe it isn’t a solution so much as a natural outgrowth of the growth in DH—has been to house DH centers in libraries. This makes sense: libraries are in a position to help serve diverse needs of multiple disciplines and fields; librarians have experience in issues like digital storage and archiving and as well as with metadata; libraries are where the archives live; and finding things is what librarians do. As Chris Bourg summarizes these strengths and traditions, “That’s our job it’s the kind of thinking and work that is a distinct strength of librarians.” (“The Once and Future Librarian”).

The partnership between libraries and DH isn’t wholly utopian; librarians and scholars such as Chris Bourg and Nina de Jesus have written extensively on the so-called “neutrality” of the library. de Jesus, in her piece “Locating the Library in Institutional Oppression,” positions the library as a tool of liberalism, and thus a part of systems of white supremacy, slavery, genocide, and Orientalism: “When we look into the collections, the actual ‘information’ contained in libraries and how it is organ-

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8 Center for History and New Media, George Mason University, http://chnm.gmu.edu/.
9 Chris Bourg, “The Once and Future Librarian,” Feral Librarian (blog), 18 March 2015.
ized, we can see that it (surely by accident) somehow manages to construct a reality wherein whiteness is default, normal, civilized and everything else is Other.”¹⁰ Bourg extends this critical look at the library towards the digital tools libraries build — “often gendered and/or racist, frequently ableist, and almost always developed with built-in assumptions about binary gender categories.”¹¹ These are similar critiques to what DH is facing, and de jesus’s advice could be heeded by both librarians and digital humanists: “Realizing the emancipatory potential of the library as institution would require breaking and disrupting the system of intellectual property and other aspects of capitalism, especially the publishing industry. It would require disrupting the empire’s mechanisms for creating ‘knowledge’ by being more than a repository for imperial knowledge products. It would require supporting Indigenous resistance to the settle state and working towards dismantling anti-Blackness.”¹²

There are examples. The best example I can give of a DH center linked to the library is at the University of Virginia, overseen for a long period by Bethany Nowviskie. She writes about the utopian possibilities of DH centers being located in libraries:

However, where the two models exist in tandem — that is, where digital research is robustly supported throughout the library as the norm for humanities research itself and where the institution is resourced adequately to support a dedicated, library-based DH center — an enviable opportunity exists…When a library can both support basic digital scholarship needs through distributed services and create a critical mass of staffing and intellectual energy in something like a center (however conceived), it has set the conditions for the

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¹⁰ nina de jesus, “Locating the Library in Institutional Oppression,” In the Library with the Lead Pipe (blog), 24 September 2014.
¹² de jesus, “Locating the Library in Institutional Oppression.”
advancement of knowledge itself, through the fulfillment of research desires yet unknown, un-expressed.¹³

But Nowviskie puts an important caveat on her vision for library-based DH centers:

Monolithic approaches to the digital humanities function well precisely nowhere—not even, in fact, at the places where they are first instantiated and from which “the model” emerges for future labs and centers. [...] A monolithic approach, I say, doesn’t even work at the monolith, because changing local conditions and the very advancement of scholarship and scholarly methods mean that every center must evolve—evolve, or die. In DH, as elsewhere, the center(s) cannot hold.¹⁴

Each DH center, wherever it may be located must be willing to shift, to evolve, but also be equipped to nurture and support the research and work scholars and graduate students are seeking to do, to be willing and able to help shepherd that work into the world.

A good example is DH at the University of Kentucky. The institution has a long and robust history of DH work. In 1999, the Collaboratory for Research in Computing for Humanities was formed, and it brought together the work of historians, computational linguists, and anthropologists. It is an impressive list of digital research and projects, and would seem to offer some resources and support to interested scholars. But the webpage hasn’t been updated in two years, and it doesn’t include other kinds of DH work going on at the university including Critical GIS and Digital Writing, two areas of great strength within the university. There is a lot of great work being done in DH at the University of Kentucky, but there doesn’t seem to be a vibrant

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¹³ Bethany Nowviskie, “Asking for It,” blog post, 8 February 2014.
¹⁴ Ibid.
and strong center or community around DH itself, just around disciplines or projects.

And maybe the name itself of the Collaboratory is a give away: it is still focused on humanities computing, an earlier iteration of what is now known as Digital Humanities. Names matter. I ask w(h)ither DH because it was once humanities computing, not that long ago. There are still those who hold on to humanities computing because it more accurately describes the work they do, but also because it is more exclusionary. “Digital” is a more inclusive term, encompassing the wide variety of possibilities afforded to us with the internet, mobile technology, and (yes) computers. Humanities computing, on the other hand, focuses on exactly that: computational applications to humanities disciplines. Of course we still do that in DH, and with Big Data we are probably doing more of that than ever. But it is a more narrow, more exclusionary definition of DH, and one that does not necessarily open up the possibilities of the growing and changing discipline(s) of DH.

Ted Underwood, in a blog post entitled, Digital Humanities Might Never be Evenly Distributed, explores this phenomenon I’m describing here at his own large campus:

I rapidly discover the size of this campus, and the huge range of digitally-human projects already scattered across it, already moving (quite successfully) in diametrically opposed directions — and it occurs to me, first, that it would take superhuman effort to herd them into the same room, and second, that maybe UIUC doesn’t have a digital humanities center because it doesn’t need one. I’m finding all the resources I need over at GSLIS and NCSA; other kinds of projects are also humming along; maybe we’ve never developed a single center precisely because our various distributed centers are so strong.¹⁵

He goes on to describe the various shortcomings of this model, including difficulty promoting the activities to the larger community, and working to connect undergraduates in particular to this kind of work.

This brings up another point about names and naming; think back to the quote from The New Republic article: “Communications, rhetoric/composition, and media studies will take English’s place.” These are disciplines that already exist alongside English, and ones that have an uneasy relationship with digital humanities. There is a lot of debate around whether or not these disciplines and fields “belong” in digital humanities, but also whether or not these fields and disciplines even want to be a part of DH. There is a growing push within fields that have been working on “the digital” or technology more broadly for a long time (like Computers and Writing for example) to differentiate themselves and resist the temptation or the pressure to be subsumed under the Big DH Tent. What these three fields share is often the perception and attitude in the past (and often still in the present) that they were “less than” the traditional humanities field, and now that we’ve all embraced the digital turn, they want the respect and recognition they feel they deserve, without having to become a part of the latest and greatest digital humanities trend, a “trend” they have been a part of and to a certain extent, leading.

We are also seeing a growth in new kinds of programs that might look or sound a little like DH, but that are calling themselves something entirely new and different. One example is the new department in Computational Media at UC Santa Cruz, the first of its kind. There is already a degree in Computational Media at Georgia Tech and at the University of Calgary, but this is the first stand-alone department rather than interdisciplinary program. Ian Bogost, a professor at Georgia Tech observes: “There is sometimes a sense that we’ve decoupled computing from its cultural and artistic and humanistic context, and

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16 James Pulizzi, “In the Near Future, Only Very Wealthy Colleges Will Have English Departments.”
some of the trouble we might point to in the world we are living in—run by Wall Street and Silicon Valley—is perhaps a result of thinking of everything as just an engineering problem.”

Sounds a lot like DH, but maybe not.

We have moved from Humanities Computing to Digital Humanities, which broadened the field, to Computational Media, which would seem to narrow the field yet again. Or at least breaks off a piece of what could be considered digital humanities (but maybe isn’t) and stakes a new place for itself within the various fields of study and disciplines and departments. W(h)ither DH indeed. We find ourselves within DH continually trying to simultaneously define and resist the Center, but the Center has always been the dominant model for DH. Is DH the prism, then, where we refract into a rainbow of colors? Should we think, then, of DH work and research as a spectrum? But, depending on what side of the prism you’re on, you don’t see the refracted light, but instead see the monolithic white light. Is this a good analogy for DH right now?

Who does DH?

We’ve spent a good deal of time talking about the center(s) of DH, but I want to move on now to examine the question: Who does DH? Adeline Koh posited a pretty provocative position on this subject when she wrote:

You are already a digital humanist, whether or not you know it. [...] But while digital humanities may seem like an intimidating, exponentially growing field with varying ideas of “insiders” and “outsiders,” you and your students are all already digital humanists, because you all use technology in your daily lives. At it’s best, the digital humanities is about engaging more critically with the intersections between technology and how we act, think and learn. Without knowing

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it, you’re probably already using many of the techniques of digital humanists in your life and in your classroom.\textsuperscript{18}

On one hand, this statement could be misread to argue for subsuming long-active disciplines, like digital media or rhetoric, into the larger whole of DH. There is indeed something downright \textit{colonial} about the tendency for DH to claim other fields and disciplines. But, that is not what Koh is doing here. Rather, she is resisting the rigid definition of DH that keeps appearing around the question of building, a question I myself I have struggled with. David Golumbia most recently addressed this tension between the “big tent” tendencies of DH versus the narrowly defined and, I might add, \textit{disciplining} definition focused exclusively on building. This tension is almost wholly original within higher education, particularly in the humanities:

The difference in DH, and the reason definitions of it matter so much, is that from its inception, some very powerful people and institutions have insisted on one definition, even when many others do not accept or endorse that definition, and these persons and institutions have been able to enforce that definition in one critically important sphere that has no parallel in queer theory, deconstruction, or any other recent movement in literary studies: newly available, large-scale, field-defining grant funding. Further, the availability of unprecedented amounts of grant funding to English professors has had a follow-on deformative effect in perhaps an even more critical venue: hiring. These, in turn, have had consequences (though, I think, less obviously dramatic ones) for promotion and tenure standards, although I’ll leave those aside for the time being.\textsuperscript{19}


Building in DH is a privilege. We should all be thankful for the builders, those who digitized, built the databases, created the interfaces and tools, wrote the algorithms, and allowed for DH to enter the mainstream because the tools and the research became increasingly visible and accessible. However, we should never forget that building is a privilege. It requires infrastructure, support, and a team of skilled programmers, archivists, and others. It requires a large institution and institutional support. It demands capital. And it requires, in a lot, but not all cases, tenure. These are elements that are in short supply in today’s higher education landscape.

It should also be pointed out that there is building being done outside of the academy, which is also excluded from being considered a legitimate form of DH scholarship. But there is also a tendency to assume that all work and knowledge production seeks the support and approbation of the academy. Returning to Nina de Jesus’s work, she connects a long history of appropriation by institutions as an extension of slavery. One recent example is the multiple attempts by institutions to appropriate the community-based database and map of missing and murdered Indigenous women called Save Wiyabi Mapping Project. Founder Lauren Chief Elk recently tweeted: “You’re the ones who need to prey on young women’s words & labor for articles and funding.” The bitter irony of using this tweet in this essay are not lost on me. But grassroots, digital efforts by different communities are excluded, appropriated, and their contributions often erased.

It’s also important to make the point that a DH narrowly defined as “only those who build” within the narrow confines of a center privileges only a certain kind of scholar that comes from a certain kind of graduate program. It also, almost cannibalistically, means that any tool that is developed to automate the work

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20 de Jesus, “Locating the Library in Institutional Oppression.”
21 Lauren Chief Elk (@chiefelk), Twitter post, 25 March 2015, 12:23 p.m. See also Dorothy Kim, “Social Media and Academic Surveillance: The Ethics of Digital Bodies,” Model View Culture, 7 October 2014.
of DH automatically makes that no longer a part of DH. An example Golumbia gives is around HTML or even topic modeling. As he points out,

I don’t deny that there will probably remain new topic modeling tools to build. What I am hoping to point out is that the very usefulness of topic modeling suggests it will become part of the scholar’s toolkit, and that if we then arbitrarily deem that success to mean it is no longer part of our research enterprise, we are cutting off our nose to spite our face. Wide adoption and use is success, and interesting results produced with digital tools deserve to be called digital humanities. 22

The more we demand of those who want to “do” digital humanities, the more we privilege and the more we exclude. Ernest Priego fears that we are seeing the rise in the demand for what he calls “the super humanist”—the humanist who is the top of his or her traditional humanistic field and can code, program, do network analysis, etc, etc, etc. 23 Priego has the same concerns I do around the digital divide, the scarcity of resources, and how DH can be used to reinforce traditional institutional hierarchies, between the “haves” and “have-nots.” These super-humanists, and the bigger and better tools they build, are but a pipe dream for many graduate students, not to mention contingent faculty. But it also neglects scholars in the developing world, whose institutions are even more starved, while their infrastructure can’t support the bandwidth necessary to use the tools created elsewhere, or access even their own archives, held and digitized elsewhere. In response, Global Outlook DH (or GO::DH) created a working group around Minimal Computing, in part in response to the difficulty participants were faced with when THATCamp Caribe was held in Cuba.

The GO::DH group itself “acts to foster collaboration and cooperation across regions and economies; it coordinates research on and in support of the use of technology in these areas across the globe; and it advocates for a global perspective on work in this sector.” GO::DH advocates for a global perspective. This has been another point of conflict within DH, particularly in defining who does DH, and what has been, and continues to be funded in DH. Looking at the biggest DH projects, they typically revolve around the already established canon of literature and history. Big Data leaves little room for microhistory; the majority can drown out and silence those smaller voices and stories. The language of DH is, in most cases, English. The priorities of what has been digitized are that which was already catalogued, already visible, already known. And, it is largely old because it is out of copyright. These are not insignificant concerns, and they are concerns that are beginning to be voiced within DH.

When Adeline Koh writes about how we all already do DH, she is also including herself in her recovery work with “Digitizing ‘Chinese Englishmen’” and advocacy work with Post-colonial Digital Humanities. She is looking to “decolonize the archive” or counter the master narrative the main, dominant archive and “big data” of digitization often provides and presents. This work used to be more prominent in digital humanities. Amy E. Earhart, in her article “Can Information be Unfettered? Race and the New Digital Humanities Canon,” which appeared in the book Debates in Digital Humanities, points out that many early “recovery” projects around race have been lost, due in large part because they were passion projects done by individual or small groups of graduate students, and as Earhart notes: “Digital humanists are fond of talking about sustainability as a problem for current and future works, but it is clear that

we already have sustained a good deal of loss within the broadly defined digital canon.\textsuperscript{26}

This also raises the question of language particularly if DH programs are seen as being traditionally housed in English departments. This is a topic near and dear to my heart, having grown up in Quebec, where questions of language and translation were always driving conversations. How do we “translate” in a literal and figurative way into different languages, and perhaps more importantly, cultural traditions? Looking at the major DH projects from around the world, it is hard to find ones that look to preserve works done in minority languages. Of course there are exceptions within computational linguistics and anthropology, but they are not the mainstream DH projects that get much of the attention. GO::DH has done great work trying to translate DH into a variety of languages, while databases like Mukurtu bring an Indigenous approach to knowledge, remembering, and archiving.\textsuperscript{27} This is an instructive example of a people and culture making archives for themselves, rather than letting the traditions of and traditional archive continue to dictate and define them. The Center(s) are being challenged.

The collective Transform DH is interested in all of these issues and more: gender, sexuality, race, and class issues are all important considerations that those who are a part of the Transform DH collective look to examine.\textsuperscript{28} It also seeks to make visible the labor that women, LGBTQ\textsuperscript{a}, and people of color have done in DH and the digital more broadly, and that has often been erased by history. A recent article they promoted was from The New Inquiry called “The Lady Vanishes” on the invisible workforce that digitizes the books available to us to do introductory DH work using the Google Ngram.\textsuperscript{29} Or how there is an entire underclass of Blacks and Latinos working for poverty wages in Silicon Val-


\textsuperscript{28} #TransformDH, http://transformdh.org/.

ley, who design the computers and smart phones we use.\textsuperscript{30} Or the content moderators who live invisibly overseas.\textsuperscript{31} We love our tools, but we often don’t want to confront the labor issues inherent in what went into making them. Or the “crowdsourcing” some DH projects have come to rely on, as articulated by Martin Eve (but he is by far not the only one): “whenever we want a job done and somebody volunteers to do it, that person must, in the vast majority of cases, surely be supporting themselves through some other form of paid employment. What, though, about people who need jobs but find their livelihoods undercut by others volunteering to do work for free because it looks like a game? Perhaps you don’t care about this and think that the labour “market” should fix this. I think I do care and don’t believe in a market for labour that would make this work, evidenced by rises in under- and un-employment and top-loading of wealth.”\textsuperscript{32}

Adjuncts are excluded from most DH work because of their precarious positions, while graduate students often do much of the heavy lifting on the building of projects then postdoctoral positions that place unreasonable demands on the newest digital super-humanist. Or, the super-humanist can’t find a position at all because they didn’t quite get to be super enough: know too much code and not enough traditional scholarship, you are qualified only for what are known as “coding monkey” jobs, where you code someone else’s project, at low wages at that. Don’t know enough code and you might be left in the thankless DH postdocs that expect you to do all the things. As put by Miriam Posner, “I’ve been frank, as you may know, about what I think of taking someone fresh out of grad school, giving her a temporary gig, and expecting her to be the sole torchbearer for some amorphous DH initiative. In brief, it’s a bad idea, for a lot

\textsuperscript{30} Sam Biddle, “The Non-White Workers of Silicon Valley Get Screwed Every Day,” Valleywag, 26 August 2014.
\textsuperscript{31} Adrian Chen, “The Laborers Who Keep Dick Pics and Beheadings Out of Your Facebook Feed,” Wired, 23 October 2014.
\textsuperscript{32} Martin Eve, “Universities, DH, ‘the crowd,’ and Labor That Looks Like a Game,” blog post, 12 November 2014.
of different reasons. It’s not fair to the person you’re hiring, who will spend her entire tenure trying desperately to impress you at this impossible task so she can keep her job.”  

Increasingly, though, DH positions, beyond the postdoc, are non-tenure track positions. They are, for all of their fancy titles, contingent. I think here of people like Brian Croxall, who ran and won a spot within the MLA executive council on contingency and alt-academic issues, but also Bethany Nowviskie, a now-tenured professor at University of Virginia, who addresses contingency within DH and beyond in a 2014 blog post: “But we have to address the downsides of a culture of abundance: of conspicuous consumption; the increasing carbon footprint of DH; the increasing adjunctification and contingency not only of our teaching faculty but of knowledge workers of all stripes, including software developers and librarians.”  

We are beginning to notice, to speak out and speak up, and this, too, for me, is DH work.

Another question around DH work is what is considered “scholarship”—particularly around more public-facing DH work and around teaching. Mark Sample poses the question in this way: “When does service become scholarship? When does anything—service, teaching, editing, mentoring, coding—become scholarship? My answer is simply this: a creative or intellectual act becomes scholarship when it is public and circulates in a community of peers that evaluates and builds upon it.”

This, to me, is where the most exciting work is being done in DH. But I think it reflects the areas where those who felt (or who really are) cut off from the traditional DH centers have looked to grow their own work and make space for themselves. The most interesting tools that are being currently developed focus on sharing, community-building, a more public-facing DH, and

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enhancing the student educational experience. And because of technology, it can cross over into the realm of scholarship more easily and more visibly because there are so many more opportunities for engagement with our peers, who then take it and build from it.

What are we trying to build?

No matter how we posit the space that DH occupies, many of these debates elide the affective labor that is required. Should the building of communities be as, if not more, important than the tools they produce? And do the community-building tools represent a way to dismantle traditional hierarchical power structures, including the Center?

But to start, how do we build community? Lynne Siemens, in the article “The Balance between On-line and In-person Interactions: Methods for the Development of Digital Humanities Collaboration,” points to the importance of balancing the different kinds of contact and communication in order for a collaborative DH project to work. It isn’t until the end of the essay that she mentions the importance of developing trust to ensure a successful collaboration using “a variety of channels.” Certainly, getting to know your collaborators through Twitter and Facebook are ways to develop trust through a more, for lack of a better word, intimate relationship. Those banalities that are often pointed to as being why social media should be avoided are those very things that help build relationships and trust between individuals. Working within open-access channels can also disrupt the hierarchical structures that have dominated higher education.

While once upon a time, academics saw each other once or twice a year at conferences, we can now more easily grow these connections and relationships into more intimate (and fruit-

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ful) relationships that benefit us. We “share” our triumphs, our bad days, our Pandora stations (replacing the mixed tape), our ideas, our favorite shows, our favorite tools. We are not “intimate” with everyone on our timelines or our “friends” list, and that is where email, the direct message, and Skype/Google chat can play a role. Much like writers and artists once intimated in letters to close friends that mixed the professional and the personal, we can begin by talking about a project at hand and end with a conversation about our lives at that moment. This is not a waste of time, but a way to grow trust, allowing for intimacy, and then from there, community.

What does community mean in the 21st century, and how does it specifically relate to digital humanities? We typically talk about “networks” now when we look at the relationships today because perhaps community is too utopian a concept for our particular moment. In their introduction to a special issue of *Digital Humanities Quarterly*, “Theorizing Connectivity: Modernism and the Network Narrative,” Wesley Beal and Stacy Lavin talk about how some Modernists used what we now consider a network to “perform an important mediation of the period’s impulses towards totalization and dispersal, unity and fragmentation that typify the period’s tensions in, for example, the U.S.’s changing demographic makeup.” As traditional forms of community dissolved, the network as we now know came in to replace it. Now, networking can also symbolize the professionalization that has taken over higher education, where trust and distrust are replaced by elements such as cost-benefit analyses to judge the amount of time to invest in relationships. Communities, I think, are more necessary than ever in academia.

In the article “Community and Consumption: The Transformation of Social Space Online,” Mark McGuire offers a number of definitions of community, but that tend to include “a group of people; social interaction; shared cultural practices; common

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geographic space; and a sense of belonging.”38 Today, most communities within DH would qualify as “communities of interest, which do not depend on shared space.” Howard Rheingold identifies the important element of intimacy in these virtual (or semi-virtual, as the case may be) communities because these “social aggregations [...] emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace.”39 Without “important and meaningful” communication, a virtual community cannot exist.

But these “virtual communities” have existed since before the web. My experiences with the research “collaboratory” EMiC (Editing Modernism in Canada) has reminded me of the period of literary growth that we all studied: the Modernist movement in Canada that was nurtured in large part by epistolary dialogues carried out between many different members.40 While something like the Montreal Movement started in and around McGill, it continued through letters and other forms of communication and collaboration from a distance once the members dispersed because of jobs, family, or other reasons (including seeking better opportunities in New York or the ex-pat experience in Paris). Frank Scott, quoted in Patricia Godbout’s book on “sociabilité interculturelle,” laments this new distance between member of his artistic community:

Yet, I still do not like seeing the rare good talent of this country go elsewhere. Why, I wonder? Am I too nationalist? I think not; I think selfishness is at the bottom of it. I don’t intend to leave myself (though I have been away several times) so I want more good people around me. Especially poets.41

Given the job market the way it is for academics, we can wish for more people who share our interest in DH and (in the case of EMiC) Modernist poetry and poets in Canada to live and work within our own institutions (or city, if we are so lucky), but the reality is that we go where the jobs are, traveling across the country, or (as in my case) leaving the country altogether. But we can still form these communities despite geography.

DH centers represent communities that have developed more normally, sharing both geography and common interests. But again, these physical centers can increasingly reach beyond their physical location; I’m thinking in particular of a place like HASTAC centered in Michigan (now Arizona), but reaching hundreds of DH enthusiasts through its extended community. Again, these kinds of communities have long existed, created and nurtured by aspiring artists and intellectuals. In his book, *When Canadian Literature Moved to New York*, Nick Mount describes the communities, both official and unofficial, that grew in New York to help support Canadian writers:

Here, in New York, Canadian writers formed their country’s first professional literary communities. At these gathering places they shared setbacks and successes, read and discussed each other’s work, exchanged literary gossip, and argued new literary trends. They helped each other into print, passing on tips about copy-hungry editors and warning about those slow with a paycheque. Most directly, they published each other’s work in the magazines they edited. […] And, crucially for some Canadian writers, they extended the reach of these communities beyond New York, using their positions and connections to promote and publish the work of friends still at home and in other literary centers.42

DH Centers and “collaboratories” (I think ProfHacker and Grad-Hacker are two great examples of DH communities as well) grew

as an antidote to the potentially isolating and dehumanizing elements of academia. We do all of those things that Mount describes; we help each other, we publish each other, we give feedback to each other, we even, when we can, hire each other. That we happen to live dispersed around the world, meeting infrequently, makes no difference as we are able to maintain our bounds through the virtual communities we contribute to, participate in, and share. These communities, using a mixture of both open source and commercial digital tools, also help to challenge the profit-driven motives of both the modern university and modern society. As put by McGuire,

The conversion of the Internet, which began as a public service project, into a collection of privately owned online communities, repeats this transformation in electronic space. In both cases, the image of what has been replaced is all that remains. This façade mitigates the loss and conceals the revised function.43

These companies (such as Amazon in McGuire’s study) create “the illusion of community.” Questions of “ownership and control” are some of the central issues that concern DH practitioners and theorists, but also in how we choose to use such tools mindfully and critically (practices that we also often use in our pedagogical approaches when teaching with/about these same tools).

The communities within the Digital Humanities also work to counter what Alan Liu describes in his book *The Laws of Cool* (paraphrased eloquently here by Andrew Prescott),

how modern computing is an instrument of that managerial impulse which seeks to make knowledge work as mechanical and controlled as work on a production line. Liu reminds

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us how the aesthetics and language of computing, with its excitement about the latest “cool” medium, are a refuge from the grim reality of a cubicle in an open plan office on an industrial scale. In the end Liu sees the digital humanities as an escape from the tyranny of the cool.44

I have never, ever been cool in my life, so this seems like the perfect fit for me and I think many of us. But the “managerial” concerns (and financial limitations) of the modern university encroach on this ethos, forcing what McGann describes as “a haphazard, inefficient, and often jerry-built arrangement of intramural instruments, free-standing centers, labs, enterprises, and institutes, or special digital set up outside the traditional departmental structure of the university.”45 Is this, from an academic’s (or alt-academic’s) perspective, really a bad thing? I read his description of the situation of DH (in this particular case, the UK), I see a number of different kinds of communities that developed organically to meet the needs of the members, rather than the members bending their needs according to the limitations placed on them by the structure of the modern university. We see some of these limitations in the US when many DH programs are housed in English departments when the interests and services are much more than English (and specifically) literary interests. Here, some good microhistory would help us understand these communities, all seemingly anomalous, but clearly (if we can judge by McGann’s tone) in need of a face.

These aren’t the only challenges that DH communities face as they try to resist and yet thrive in a traditional academic environment. Susan Brown, director of the Orlando Project, as well as the Canadian Writers Research Collaboratory, has worked extensively on not only ways to encourage and facilitate collaboration within the research communities, but also how to

measure said contributions by individual academics within the community. This is a direct response to the pressures of modern academia to measure in the name of accountability and ultimately hiring and promotion decisions. While I don’t disparage accountability, I do have an issue with artificial ways of “measuring” productivity that don’t originate organically from the community. This also isn’t to criticize the work that others are doing; I only wish to illustrate the tensions that have arisen between DH communities as they integrate themselves more fully within the traditional structures and expectations of academia.

Even working collaboratively is a challenge for most academics. Michael Best, in his article “‘A Marvelous Convenient Place’: Collaborations in the Electronic Text,” outlines how academics, even academics working in DH, tend to approach collaboration, the “familiar pattern of most Humanities scholars, working on their own, meeting occasionally at conferences, but otherwise self-directed. In a project for which there conventions of publication have been well established, there is no particular reason for scholars to do otherwise than to collaborate with the books on their desks, but in the still new electronic medium, where there are as yet no strictly defined principles for the presentation of the text, collaboration between scholar and interface designer is vital if the potential of the medium is to be realized.”46 For the first time here, we’ve heard mention of someone outside of what we would traditionally consider the humanities: the interface designer. This is an even bigger challenge for digital humanists on both sides of the traditional divide: how does a humanist talk to a programmer and vice-versa? Indeed, the relationship between programmer/developer has usually been one sided: the developer develops something and we figure out how to use it (see, Word, Explorer, Microsoft in general). These kinds of collaborative DH communities further disrupt the traditional power structure and hierarchies both within the university and in society at large; again, we are expected to be consumers of

technology, not the makers of it unless we possess a certain almost magical skill. Open source software and projects challenge that traditional dichotomy, but how many humanists feel comfortable communicating their needs to the larger community which include “technical” people. We also need systems in place, systems that don’t often exist within the university, to facilitate these kinds of collaborations.

But these aren’t the only challenges that DH communities face. In fact, the nature of communities is that some are excluded. In his introductory essay for a special issue of Digital Studies, Brent Nelson outlines some of the large lines of the DH ethos: “The digital humanities are in the business of building bridges” and goes on to describe how “in the digital age community has indeed become scalable: even large groups can be made to feel that they occupy a common space in pursuit of common interests.”

These bridges, to many, only seem to extend so far. In the recent (and, in some cases, already outdated!) collection, Debates in the Digital Humanities, two essays (and only two) deal explicitly with issues of race and none with the issue of class. In, “Why are the Digital Humanities So White?” Tara McPherson shows how the bridges between DH and Black Cultural Studies have not yet been adequately built, showing how important it is for those doing critical race studies to interrogate the foundations of computing and computational language.

Amy Earhart examines those elements that are still missing in the “open” ethos of DH, texts that originate from ethnic communities, often works and projects that once existed, but for lack of support, become lost. She points to how “the canon” is still the primary impetus for funding and grants, leaving ethnic scholars on the outside of the funding circle necessary to sustain a vibrant DH community interested in working on large-scale projects.

49 Earhart, “Can Information Be Unfettered?”
Take for example a debate that “exploded” on Twitter concerning the ethics of live-tweeting conference presentations (tweet away, I need all the exposure I can get). The discussion on Twitter was initiated by women of color, one of whom also identifies as queer. The debate was quickly trivialized (problematically by IHE, who I wrote for) and also dismissed by many members of the DH community as “been there, done that.” This response angered Tressie McMillan Cottom and she took to her blog to vent her frustrations:

Digital Humanities scholars said the debate was “dated.” The tone of posts and articles and tweets was decidedly condescending. The line went something like this: are these silly people talking about something I wrote about once two years ago?! The exchange has been characterized as both trivial and humorous. To which I say: it must be nice to think power, privilege, privacy, status competition, and access are so damn funny. Except, wait. It’s NOT funny when other people are talking about it…Is the new academic vanguard advocating for open access and dialogue or is it arguing to replace the existing elite with its own? It is a fair question, I think, but I will be sure to ask a white man to ask it so that I have a shot at an answer. Because the answer matters more to some of us than to others. Some can talk about discussions of privileged information with condescension. I cannot. I don’t have that privilege. Who I am, in body and in ascribed status, is so entangled with these discussions of access and power that they cannot seem dated or humorous or inconsequential to me. And if there is no room in digital humanities or open access or the new academic model to realize that, then I’m not interested. I’d rather keep the master I do know than fight to legitimize one that I don’t, if you please.\(^{50}\)

\(^{50}\) Tressie McMillan Cottom, “Black, Female, Thinking Out Loud & #Twittergate,” blog post, 5 October 2012.
This particular community clearly has not been bridged. I have heard similar critiques from those in other disciplines who have been doing what we now consider DH work for some time but have been excluded (particularly those who are in Rhetoric and Composition, traditionally the disrespected cousin in the English department). McMillan Cottom took to Twitter later to say that she is more interested in “the tools than the community. Anytime issues of race and tools are mentioned, I am reminded of Audre Lorde’s essay: “The Master’s Tools will never dismantle the master’s house.”51 Have we reached the point where we have, perhaps because and through our increasing connections to traditional academic structures, simply re-created the same exclusionary structures within DH? Again, communities are necessarily exclusionary, and as observed by Roopika Risam, “some point in the future, the tribes would reform DH. The future is now.”52

That tweet just quoted from Risam, and much of these discussions, are taken from three-plus years ago. I want to be optimistic about the potential of DH to be transformed, to be a site of resistance, to be a place where marginalized scholars come together and transform not just scholarship, but the institutions themselves. This paper is a combinations of two talks that I gave: one in 2012 at Western University and another in 2014 at the University of Cincinnati.53 I’ve organized a panel at the MLA, Building Bridges in Digital Humanities, in 2013, as well as co-presented at DH 2013, “Digital Humanities: Egalitarian or the New Elite?”54 This essay here is informed by what I wrote then, what was said during those panels, and the feedback I

52 Roopika Risam (@roopikarisam), Twitter post, 6 October 2012, 12:35 p.m.
54 Lee Skallerup Bessette et al., “Expanding Access: Building Bridges within Digital Humanities,” special session, MLA, 3 January 2013 and “Digital Hu-
received afterwards. But the time between then and now have not seen any great change in the literal color and tone within the digital humanities community. Recent controversies within the community saw the establishment of a “Working Group on Inclusivity.” It remains to be seen if this will lead to any real change. As Scott B. Weingart et al. point out, DH has not been the most inclusive of spaces, and it doesn’t look like it has changed much.

And so this essay collection appears, as do others, such as the forthcoming (as of this writing) *Feminist Debates in Digital Humanities*, edited by Jacque Wernimont and Elizabeth Losh, University of Minnesota Press. Are we publishing, speaking, writing for change or for tenure (or the hope of getting a tenure-track position)? This essay was a challenge to write because I myself also have no skin in the small-tent DH game anymore, so to speak; in an alt-academic, pedagogically focused position that doesn’t require publishing. Not that I ever did, really. I came to DH naive and optimistic, and wanted to contribute to the discussion and process of making it, if not better, than something different and, dare I say it, aspirational, within the spaces of the current form of academia. DH will not whither and die, but it may not flourish as an alternative and aspirational model. The Center will remain and recreate.

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