How to #DecolonizeDH: Actionable Steps for an Antifascist DH

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A number of groups have written manifestos to the digital humanities especially in relation to DH’s issues withopenness, race, disability, LGBTQ, feminist, and other kinds of non-normative bodies in the field.¹ There have been critical discussions in #transformdh, HASTAC, femtechnet and groups have been writing such manifestos and working to change DH. What I want to do here, then, is outline a set of practical steps to #decolonizedh, to make it less white, to begin working on an antifascist DH.

#DisruptDH

It is not a secret that DH as a field is a bastion of white masculinity. Its demographics are as terrible as what has been regularly criticized in tech circles in regards to the diversity of places like

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¹ In fact, you can often see these manifestos tweeted in entirety at the @DH-Manifesto_Bot and their site, The Digital Manifesto Archive, https://www.digitalmanifesto.net.
Twitter, Google, etc.\textsuperscript{2} DH also has a problem acknowledging that women are prime movers and shakers in the field to the point that we have seen in Deb Verhoeven’s talk at a recent major DH conference in Australia.\textsuperscript{3} Colleagues in a feminist tech group had to create a “binder” of digital humanities women in order to point out to so many DH committees and organizations that there are women who can keynote and be on panels in a range of areas and subjects.\textsuperscript{4} Jacqueline Wernimont writes:

There are no more excuses for having an all-male panel, an all-male editorial board, an all-male DH qualifying exams reading list, an all male anything. […] There are no more excuses. You know we are here and that we do damn fine work. Going forward, all-male panels can only be construed as a choice, not an issue of ignorance. We have been busy building the communities we want to see within DH, and now we’ve taken time from our reaching, our teaching, our lives to pull together information for you — now it’s your turn to do your part.\textsuperscript{5}

The fact that Femtechnet, and specifically Jacqueline Wernimont, had to create a “binder” in itself is telling. More recently, there has been furious conversation at the #DH2016 conference on the hashtag #DHDiversity about precisely the difficulties of inclusiveness in the field.

The discussions of the tech industry’s “diversity” problems have moved away from just discussing inclusiveness, to address the interwoven prongs of white supremacy/white nationalist/neo-nazi groups and their symbiotic relationship with the tech


\textsuperscript{3} Deb Verhoeven, “Has Anyone Seen a Woman?” talk, Digital Humanities Conference, Sydney, Australia, 2 July 2015.


\textsuperscript{5} Wernimont, “No More Excuses.”
industry and academia. There can be no discussion about #DecolonizeDH or making DH less white without a discussion about resisting white supremacy/white nationalist/neo-nazi ideologies as well as bodies and organizations in our classrooms, campuses, epistemologies, field histories, and methodologies.

DH itself is a contested field and its definition is a work in progress. Various DH volumes have defined the digital humanities as DH1 or DH2:\footnote{See Melissa Terras, Julianne Nyhan, and Edward Vanhoutte, eds., *Defining the Digital Humanities: A Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2013); Stephen Ramsay, “DH Types One and Two,” blog post, 3 May 2013; Matthew K. Gold, “The Digital Humanities Moment,” in *Debates in the Digital Humanities*, ed. Matthew K. Gold, ix–xvi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012); Ramsay, “On Building,” blog post, 11 January 2011; and Ramsay, “Who’s In and Who’s Out,” blog post, 8 January 2011.} DH1 being the kind of digital humanities work that builds things (like tools and archiving projects) and requires a knowledge of coding. DH2 is seen as the work that criticizes DH1 particularly in relation to gender, race, disability, access/class, sexuality.\footnote{Adeline Koh’s article, “Niceness, Building, and Opening the Genealogy of the Digital Humanities: Beyond the Social Contract of the Digital Humanities,” *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 25, no. 1 (2014): 93–106, explains the complexities of this split as one of hack vs. yack. Her article also explains the complexities of imagining these rubrics as separate spheres.} There has been an ongoing argument of defining DH as only just what fits in the rubric of DH1. This particular move is bullshit and intellectually narrow, closing up the possibilities of inclusiveness, let alone finding ways to resist the weaponization of the digital in fascist regimes.

Such a move—one that completely imagines DH and any kind of archive or tool-building as a neutral act—participates in a rhetoric of heteropatriarchal, ableist, white supremacy. I say this because, in fact, data, algorithms, databases, even metadata,
all of these, are never neutral. And usually, the bodies attached to the data, algorithms, databases, etc. who are most harmed are communities of color or those with intersectional identities. In fact, the data, algorithms, databases, metadata, tools, archives, and methods of the digital humanities have become violently weaponized to attack, abuse, deport, assault, mob, silence, spy, imprison, and kill targeted non-white, non-cisgendered, non-male, non-Christian, and differently abled bodies.

Currently, DH is not a safe or comfortable space for most scholars who are not white, cisgendered, able, Christian, and upper middle-class males. And considering the current rise of late-fascism and the involvement of the “alt-tech” sector intersecting with white academic supremacy to help create the nexus of what is called the “alt-right,” I believe we have to move beyond a discussion of diversity and inclusiveness to move into discussing DH justice and equity.9 The digital world and aligned with that, academic digital humanities, helped shape and create the rise of the “alt-right” who have robustly used all digital means to weaponize the tools, methods, results, data, and structures of this field to violently harm specific minority groups. Why, at this point, would anyone see these methods as benign? Why would the general public see them as benign? And why would we, as scholars, imagine them so? We must begin to discuss how to decolonize DH. We must discuss how to deliberately create structures and frames for an antifascist DH — to deliberately dismantle the methodologies, epistemologies, structures, data, databases, tools, archives, code that have created a world in which technology is now used to consistently bludgeon its most vulnerable denizens.

In fact, I was spurred to write this piece on how to decolonize DH because of what Annemarie Perez says in her piece in this collection, “Lowriding through the Digital Humanities.” In it, she offers an account of her experience in DH sessions over many years at MLA:

I’m taking a long time telling this. It is because the memory is painful. The panels and workshops I attended were a shock. Not only because the work was so exciting, especially, for me, the pedagogy, the mapping and time lining and other amazing projects. 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 taking about this. No one was asking where the brown people were. The absence of racialized bodies was un-noted.\footnote{Annemarie Perez, “Lowriding through the Digital Humanities,” Disrupting the Digital Humanities: Digital Edition, 6 January 2016.}

If nothing else, this volume and its pieces consistently mark and note the paucity of racialized bodies and other non-normative bodies and voices in DH.

In addition, almost all of the pieces in this volume, precisely grapple with this whiteness and lack of inclusiveness. From Mongrel Coalition Against Gringpo’s “mongrel cliff notes” to Eunsong Kim’s “The Politics of Visibility” which explores Reina Gossett’s point that “visibility is a pillar of criminalization, not a tenant of liberation” and also Grace Hong’s argument that “visibility is a rupture, an impossible articulation” for women of color.\footnote{“We Cannot Live Without Our Lives: A Conversation on Anti-blackness, Trans Resistance and Prison Abolition,” forum, University of California, San Diego, 4 November 2014. See also Grace Kyungwon Hong, The Ruptures of American Capital: Women of Color Feminism and the Culture of Immigrant Labor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), xxviii.} Or Annemarie Perez’s aforementioned “Lowriding through the Digital Humanities,” where she writes an autoethnographic counternarrative of the spaces of the digital humanities. And in this way, these counternarratives are the central node of this collection. My piece then is a call to arms, a listicle, a checklist, a guide to how to make these non-normative bodies the center of what is the digital humanities. It is also a call to resist, dismantle, disarm, and find other ways to push back against
the worldwide encroachment and centering of white heteropatriarchy and the “alt-right.” We must center the idea that “methodology needs to be decolonised. The process of its decolonisation is an ethical, ontological and political exercise rather than simply one of approach and ways of producing knowledge.”

What I think many people hoped for the digital humanities was that technological access to a larger public would mean that communities of color, LGBTQ communities, differently abled bodies would finally get a chance to have their narratives told and their archives curated. But in fact, what has happened is that the digital humanities, particularly the kind of DH that builds projects and applies for government and foundation funding, has mostly reified and made more extreme the inequities we have seen in scholarship in regards to what gets discussed, whose narratives get published, what communities have a voice. Digital technologies (social media, surveillance, algorithms, databases, etc.) are now being used to deliberately silence and harm the most vulnerable voices. Thus, though we can read the announcements for the NEH grants and see big projects related to major figures of the American and English canon — Shakespeare, Melville, etc. — projects related to communities of color, narratives of disability, the lives and archives of the LGBTQ communities are rare to the point that their inclusion feels like a form of tokenization.

In the US political climate, I wonder about the ability of government agencies to break from the nazi/fascist ideologies of the Trump White House administration. We have already seen the dismantling of the EPA, the State Department, the Education Department, why do we imagine the NEH or NSF will not also turn into an arm of the fascist state? Culture is important to the ideologies of fascist administrations, but it’s a culture that is shaped and messaged to back a white supremacist/white nationalist worldview. Before the recent rise in fascist governments, amazing projects like the South Asian American Digital

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Archive ran on shoe strings and were powered by the uncompensated labor, dedication and hopes of committed librarians, scholars, and students who want to illuminate the narratives of their communities and tell polyvocal histories. Now I wonder whether these vulnerable projects will be mobbed by the “alt-right.” One significant bright spot is that I finally see a move by these granting agencies in regards to current issues and the racial climate in the US. In particular, I was delighted to see the librarian at Washington University St. Louis—who did such an amazing job archiving the Twitter feed of #Ferguson and #BlackLivesMatter—become the Librarian of the Carter Presidential library. Her work has garnered major funding to find a way to archive and curate social media. Yet, now that bright spot also has to address the fact that Black Live Matter has been discussed by the FBI terrorism unit as “the black identity extremists” and a “threat.” Will these projects, especially government-funded ones, be used as a form of surveillance and information gathering against Black Lives Matter? Or will they be defunded without comment, as is the case with the UC Berkeley Black Panther documentary project whose $98,000 National Park Service grant was yanked without comment after a complaint from the local police union?

At another MLA 2016 session (“Repair and Reparations in Digital Public Spaces” organized by Adeline Koh and Annemarie Perez) on archives for communities of color, several scholars pointed out the complexities of creating narratives for communities who usually do not get their own histories and are not part

of the mainstream Western canon. These communities often do not trust forms of institutional, government, and other kinds of “purported” philanthropy and especially any form of digital marking or counting. They have logical reasons for this fear. As we have seen in the use of DACA data to potentially deport the Dreamers in the US, handing over information to government agencies comes with extreme and often violent risks.

This is precisely why things like Mukurtu were created to give consent and control to these native and first nation communities, who would not otherwise trust government agencies or universities (i.e., the military and university industrial complex) to “archive” them and their memories/documents/histories. Sometimes they have also hacked corporate open-access, online platforms to create depositories and archives that are not permanent but rather ephemeral nodes. For example, several Native American communities have used Facebook and its photo library as a way to crowd-source and collect the pictures in people’s personal archives. This is then accessible to these communities and can hold some sort of shape and be used but remain an impermanent archive. DH has failed to embrace ephemerality and must acknowledge itself as at an “incubator stage.”

For scholars of color and other intersectional scholars, it already takes so much labor — political, social, and cultural capital — to work ethically and with respect for various communities. Then to juggle that and the politics, funding cycles, and whiteness of DH, these scholars are already doing double or triple the work, and usually on shoe string budgets with donated labor. And now they have to work in increasingly hostile, viru-
lently white supremacist spaces in which they are under direct surveillance. This will deplete any scholar of color, making it increasingly difficult for them to live healthily. 22

What practical steps, then, must we take to make DH less white, less heteronormative, less cisgendered, and less ableist? What steps are required to begin to create an antifascist and antiracist DH? Our colleagues in STEM, whose funding, academic lines, and research are even more heavily dependent on government and foundational grants, have already organized an antifascist resistance with a list of actionable steps in SAFE (Scientists against a Fascist Establishment). 23 Before this, Chanda Prescod-Weinstein had been using her Medium platform to begin and add to a Decolonize Science Reading List. 24

The steps here (and the continued outlining of them) should begin with undergraduates. In fact, the students on our campuses see the political stakes and issues of our work more clearly and with more political urgency than we probably do — as they have been protesting consistently to decolonize the university. 25 We do have a problem with the pipeline. There are so few scholars of color and non-normative bodies within academia, it is going to take more direct and explicit efforts to get more variant bodies into these spaces and it needs to start early. However, creating a robust pipeline is only one set of labors on one end of the spectrum. The other set requires a systematic shift in thinking, decolonizing our practices, addressing systematic structural problems in our cultures, hiring, and promotion. These include issues related to how few scholars of color get hired and how

22 For an excellent discussion on how academia depletes its scholars of color, see Sara Ahmed, “Feeling Depleted?” feministkilljoys (blog), 17 November 2013.
bias works. And this goes beyond implicit bias, but must include discussions of deliberate white supremacist/white nationalist bias that targets certain marginal groups. I think it would be utterly naïve and some form of academic white innocence to imagine that just as the “alt-right” has infiltrated tech, “liberal” journalism, the entertainment industry, it has also not infiltrated academia and particularly the academic area in the humanities most connected to digital technology. As Deb Verhoeven explained in her Australian talk, it also requires that white men step down from taking up the room. These efforts must be conscious, planned, and consistently set as a priority. Simply put, good intentions without planning, structure, and labor to make changes is not going to shift any of these demographics or the cultures in which they breed.

This then is a way to answer the manifestos, to come up with a practical guide, a listicle of how to #decolonizeDH.

A practical guide to decolonize DH (polyvocal, multitudes) and to make it less white (+cishetero, ableist, and male) and to begin shaping an antifascist DH

1. The myth of “if you build it, they will come” must stop. DH needs to make concerted efforts to bring scholars of color and scholars working on non-traditional areas, minority communities, different perspectives into the mix by incentivizing their presence in DH, with targeted and directed (1) Mentorship; (2) Seed money for projects; (3) Resources (both technical and in terms of working through ways to move projects along); (4) Money for conferencing and networking. DH must ask the questions pointed out by Dafina-Lazarus Stewart: “Equity responds: ‘Who is trying to get in the room but can’t? Whose presence in the room is under constant threat

27 Bernstein, “Alt-white.”
of erasure?’ [...] Equity responds, ‘What conditions have we created that maintain certain groups as the perpetual majority here?’ [...] Justice challenges, ‘Whose safety is being sacrificed and minimized to allow others to be comfortable maintaining dehumanizing views?’”

2. **DH needs to stop being defensive about its whiteness** (particularly its insistence on compiling a list of “projects” about communities of color). That is not the point. The bodies at the margins are being violently attacked. If you are not digging in to help, fight back, and do the work against white supremacy, you are wasting our time.

3. **DH must stop ignoring critical race theory and postcolonial/decolonial theory.** DH needs to stop pretending critical race and postcolonial/decolonial theory have not been discussed, theorized, prototyped, and implemented by scholars of color for decades. This begins with #inclusive citation, #inclusive panels, #inclusive syllabi, #inclusive grants, etc. The computational methods used by DH are implicated and complicit in helping organize the Holocaust, creating and running the algorithms that help targeted racist information cascades, deporting DACA and refugees from the US. Academics are not innocent nor have we ever been in our history. DH needs to ask how to dismantle and decolonize its standard histories, epistemologies, and methodologies.

4. **DH must find a way to break the “only lonely” system.** Stewart continues: “Equity answers, ‘What are people experiencing on campus that they don’t feel safe when isolated and separated from others like themselves?’” This is a question that DH should ask and constantly work to change. This means creating inclusive DH cohorts so that non-white, non-cishetero, non-male groups do not feel alienated while trying to work in DH arenas.

5. **DH must have separate funds for inclusive projects.** DH must earmark separate money for projects related to and run

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28 Stewart, “Language of Appeasement.”
29 Ibid.
by communities of color, faculty of color, graduate students of color, etc. They must be separate and specifically geared to expand this range of work, give credit, give funding, give resource help.

6. **DH must stop writing narratives that attempt to wipe from memory the existence of entire fields.** DH must stop ignoring or coopting new media, computers and writing, digital rhetoric, and digital pedagogy as integral and central fields in its history, praxis, and future.

7. **DH must stop excessively citing white men.** DH must, as Sara Ahmed discusses, stop creating conference and panel structures that replicate white genealogies. In other words, stop citing only white men. Stop having only #manels. Stop having collections about the digital humanities almost entirely made up of white men.

8. **DH must decolonize its conferences and panels.** Likewise, DH must decolonize the biggest conferences in the field and start to apportion out panels and presence by a different standard of inclusiveness. Organizing committees must find participants and panelists that represent the larger populations of their worlds. Follow the models laid out by the decolonizing science colleagues who have collaborated with indigenous groups to discuss the epistemologies, structures, and methodologies of the field. DH must decolonize to make itself a “tool of resistance.” But this can only be done with the most marginal groups centered and leading these conversations.30

9. **DH methods must not be only about tools.** Digital methods classes must stop being just about tools. They must include a balance of discussing critical issues like race, gender, disability, multimodality, sexuality, etc. Otherwise, graduate training works to further replicate the same frames that have made DH so white and so male and so focused on tool-building. All DH classes need to be decolonized. If they are not, they are upholding white supremacist heteropatriarchy.

10. **DH must fund scholarships for training scholars of color.** DH training needs to directly give scholarships and particularly try to assemble groups to help potential scholars of color learn new skills but also these groups can allow people to talk to each other about some of the issues they see at stake and potentially find other collaborators.

11. **DH must have further resources for scholars of color.** Help DH scholars of color meet with publishers and funding officers to talk about both DH funding applications and how to thread their research work in multiple directions to get full credit in promotion and tenure. Scholars with diverse bodies are not going to do DH work unless they know they can get credit.

12. **DH must prioritize HBCUs, community colleges, and minority-serving institutions.** The schools in the trenches of inclusive higher education are not places like Yale or even the SLAC where I’ve taught, Vassar. They are community colleges, HBCUs, and minority-serving institutions. There must be separate and ear-marked funds, training, mentorship for faculty at these institutions and a pool of resources and money for them to create projects with their students.

13. **DH must train and include adjuncts.** As the statistics have shown that over 70% of the US professoriate are adjuncts, we must address how to find funds, support, infrastructure, and help to bring in the largest population of faculty in the country. We must train and include adjuncts. We must make sure they are on our panels, collections, grant proposals.

14. **DH must use the Rooney Rule.** The *Washington Post* article had a great suggestion on how to diversify Traditionally White Universities by using what Football has used, the Rooney Rule. Namely the requirement that at least 1 minority must be interviewed for every senior position. Facebook has decided to begin using this rubric. What would happen if the Rooney Rule were used in the digital humanities for every position, every major grant, every major conference keynote and panel?
As the *Washington Post* recently pointed out:

African Americans make up 13 percent of the U.S. population and 15 percent of the enrolled student population at America’s colleges, but only 5.5 percent of all full-time faculty are black. Back in 2007, when the black faculty rate was 5.4 percent, the *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* predicted black faculty rates would reach parity with the percentage of blacks in the United States in about 140 years. Long time coming. Unfortunately, between 2009 and 2011, black faculty rates actually slipped back a little. So, that original prediction might be off by a generation or two […]. Remarkably, 96 percent of black tenured faculty are at HBCUs (even though HBCUs comprise only 3 percent of the nation’s 3000 colleges and universities). If HBCUs disappeared, so would most of the nation’s black academics […]. We had a 43 percent increase in the number of black PhDs between 2000 and 2010, but during that time black faculty appointments at TWIs increased only 1.3 percent. This is not a crisis of supply.31

There are people of color who work in various DH areas who have Ph.Ds. Are the DH jobs going to minority candidates in the field? As DH programs tend not to be established at HBCUs, what exactly then does this say about the demographics of the digital humanities? Or does this require that our students begin to protest DH centers, DH programs, DH organizations with signs calling to decolonize the field and calling for #BlackLivesMatter in academia before DH begins to make concerted efforts to change?

I am of course giving DH the benefit of the doubt here. Its power brokers could respond like so many universities have already responded by demonstrating further white fragility and defensiveness. As I said earlier, that is not the point. Isn’t the point to

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make the digital humanities matter to communities of color, LG-BTQIAA, international, global south, disability communities, etc. The largest social and political phenomena of the last six years have implicated the digital (#arabspring, #solidarityisforwhite-women, #TrayvonMartin, #NotYourAsianSidekick, #Ferguson, #BlackLivesMatter) and the public. When is DH going to tell these narratives as the center of their methodological praxis?

The final goal should be about the benchmarks of equity and justice. Stewart explains:

Equity celebrates reductions in harm, revisions to abusive systems and increases in supports for people’s life chances as reported by those who have been targeted. [...] Justice celebrates getting rid of practices and policies that were having disparate impacts on minoritized groups.”

This volume has been entirely about speaking.

*If we don’t speak, if we don’t prompt one another to speak, then yes, we are left with silence. Where has that gotten us so far?*

— Audrey Watters

*Your silence will not protect you.*

— Audre Lorde

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32 Stewart, “Language of Appeasement.”
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disrupting the digital humanities


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