Alternative Historiographies of the Digital Humanities

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Published by Punctum Books

Dorothy Kim and Adeline Koh.
Alternative Historiographies of the Digital Humanities.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/84502.

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Towards a Digital Cultural Studies: The Legacy of Cultural Studies and the Future of Digital Humanities

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“However far modern science and technics have fallen short of their inherent possibilities, they have taught mankind at least one lesson: Nothing is impossible.”
— Lewis Mumford, Technics and Civilization

In his groundbreaking 1957 work, The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working Class Life, the sociologist and literary scholar Richard Hoggart weaves together sociological analysis, autobiography, and close reading to examine the rise of an American-inflected mass culture in midcentury England. Part lament at the loss of British working class culture, Hoggart’s book also served as a call to action for academics to take seriously the lived experience of working class people. Raymond Williams published a similarly radical book in 1958; in Culture and Society, Williams takes on the notion of culture itself, arguing that British conceptions of culture from the eighteenth through twentieth centuries have developed in part as a response to the Industrial Revolution. Writing in the 1980s about the evolution and history of cultural studies, Stuart Hall pointed to the deceptive upheaval
at play in both these works and in the works they inspired.¹ Both in the 1950s and now, cultural studies is a radical project. Interdisciplinary or even antidisciplinary, the field demands scholarship that is not only engaged theoretically and empirically, but politically as well. To do the work of cultural studies is to always be engaged with the political ramifications of that work and to push for more sophisticated understanding of how systems of power and control are established, exercised, and disrupted through culture. In a moment marked by a rise in white supremacist activities both in the US and around the world, this project is increasingly urgent.

In this chapter, I argue that one way of increasing the diversity of participants is by increasing the diversity of perspectives, positions, and fields valued. The humanities is more and more widespread—I would argue delightfully so—in the types of questions researchers ask and the types of projects they produce; it is simultaneously growing, slowly at least, in diversity among the researchers themselves. The overwhelming homogeneity of Digital Humanities stands in sharp contrast to the growing visibility of fields like gender and ethnic studies. The contrast is thrown into sharper relief when we consider the degree to which these vibrant fields are absent from digital humanities’ theoretically big tent. I am interested in the possibilities of cross-pollinating digital humanities with cultural studies in part because I see the radicalism of cultural studies as a potential path towards a digital humanities that is diverse in meaningful ways, that not only engages in cultural criticism that is rightfully framed within broader political discourses, but that creates an environment in which the righteous legacies of intellectual vanguard are carried forward like flaming torches, where a recentering of the work of people of color, of women, of queer people, of those outside of or at the margins of the academy is seen not only as possible, but foundational. We come not to burn, but to light a path for ourselves.

I propose an alternate history of the digital humanities that traces the field not to humanities computing, but instead to the provocations of cultural studies. In doing so, I ask key questions about the purpose and utility of digital humanities scholarship for addressing social, cultural, and historical problems. What might a digital humanities directly shaped by Marxist and feminist traditions look like? How might the legacy of radicalism inherent to cultural studies help energize, redirect, and empower digital humanities as publicly engaged scholarship? How can and should digital humanists draw on the works of scholars not only like Hoggart, Hall, and their Birmingham colleagues, but the broader field including scholars like Gloria Anzaldúa, Andrew Ross, and Janice Radway?

While considering these questions, I highlight the successes and limitations of current digital humanities models and propose a loose framework for a digital humanities that takes seriously its debt to cultural studies. I begin by surveying key texts in cultural studies and highlighting how digital humanities projects have or could extend the types of work carried out in these historic texts. Then, I identify key characteristics of digital cultural studies, and finally detail a tentative framework for the cultivation of future projects. Alternate histories are a means of re-centering and re-grounding, but they are also an opportunity to imagine alternative futures; fundamentally, this chapter is a work of speculative nonfiction, an imagining of a digital humanities that is deeply engaged in questions of public concern and cultural immediacy, and one that not only draws from but is led by the deep well of diversity that is increasingly evident elsewhere in the humanities. Ultimately, the framework proposed here is a call to action for a digital humanities that, like cultural studies, is aware of the degree to which it is always already engaged in the work of cultural politics.

A Call to Arms

Digital humanities can and should engage with the diversity of human experiences and concerns. However, the field has strug-
gled with diversity at a number of levels, which is evident not only in who fits in to mainstream digital humanities discourse, but also in the types of work that are most visible in the field. In analyzing submissions for Digital Humanities 2015, for example, Scott Weingart found some striking trends; 21 percent of submissions were tagged as involving Text Analysis, and Literary Studies accounted for 20 percent of submissions not only in 2015, but in the preceding two years. There is nothing wrong with these approaches or fields, but what is striking is the absence of a number of fields that have become prominent in the broader discourse of the humanities, and in particular in what I would call the cultural studies-inflected humanities, while remaining marginal to digital humanities. As both Weingart and Jacqueline Wernimont point out, gender studies is nearly absent from the same pool of submissions, with only 1.2 percent of submissions marked as “gender studies.” Weingart concludes his analysis noting that while most of the trends are unsurprising, they can be seen as disappointing: “The fact that the status is pretty quo is worthy of note, because many were hoping that a global DH would seem more diverse, or appreciably different, in some way.”

The status quo of ideas and fields that Weingart highlights is intertwined with a status quo of people and participants. Miriam Posner has written, for example, about how the insistence that everyone in digital humanities learn to code is embedded in a broader context in which women face significant challenges to gaining coding skill. As a result, the elevation of coding as the essential foundation of digital humanities work can mar-

3 @profwernimont (Jacqueline Wernimont), Twitter, November 6, 2014, 15:40 UTC, https://twitter.com/profwernimont/status/530384290392342528.
ginalize women in the field. Similarly, Bethany Nowviskie has suggested that data mining has become a kind of “gentleman’s sport” in part because both funders and scholars have engaged in a particular rhetorical framing of the associated practices. In her address to the DH 2015 conference held in Sydney Australia, Deb Verhoeven begins by asking a series of questions regarding Australian flora and fauna. How many in the audience have seen a funnel-web spider? A koala? These seemingly humorous questions circle towards a damning one: “Now for the worst and most elusive of creatures. How many of you yesterday saw a woman on this stage? [pause] Or anyone who isn’t just a standard issue bloke?” With these questions, Verhoeven launches a fiery speech titled “Has Anyone Seen a Woman?,” in which she condemns the conference’s “parade of patriarchs” and the universalizing of one (white, male, cisgender, heterosexual, western) perspective. “Do this because you embrace diversity in all its complexity, not because you have checklists or policies, but because you recognize that the real story of DH is more heterogeneous and more complex and more vibrant than you have allowed it to be to date.” In her speech, Verhoeven directly addresses “standard issue blokes,” calling for increased diversity at one of digital humanities most visible and best attended annual conferences. The marginalization of both gender studies as a topic and women as scholars is intertwined, and it is also not an isolated problem, but one entangled within a complex nexus of marginalization of both scholars and scholarly thought. The invisibility of women, of people of color, of people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, genderqueer — of people who aren’t “standard issue blokes” — across digital humanities remains profound. If we want to make things better, we must actively practice the commitment to diversity so many of us claim. If the submissions to conferences and publications are not di-

verse, we should actively solicit work to diversify the pool in consideration and also ensure that our programming committees and editorial boards are not homogenous. In constructing panels and events, we should make sure that nobody can come up and ask, like Verhoeven, to “show me a woman.” These types of simple steps are not a complete solution, but they are concrete steps to be taken in improving the current state of affairs. If we are claiming digital humanities is a big tent, a broad, representative field, we must do the work to make it so. If we value, at all, the complexity of human experience, something that should be the very heart of the humanities, it is a moral imperative that we do so.

In the quote at the beginning of this chapter, Mumford suggests that technology teaches us that “anything is possible,” and I would suggest this is true, but horribly so: anything is possible, including the reinscription of existing inequalities. The historians among us, in particular, have watched countless alleged revolutions in technology turn into these types of reinscriptions. If we are not careful about the ways in which we enact our own biases, if digital humanities is not pushed to become transformative, then it is nothing more than a new verse in an old, disappointing song, another opportunity for technology to efface the specificities of culture and history, to reinforce old hierarchies of power, and to continue to neglect the real crises of human experience in favor of propping up obsolete canons.

Cultural Studies: A Historical Primer

Cultural studies as a field is often traced back to the book by Richard Hoggart I mentioned earlier, but I do not wish, particularly in a volume that celebrates the complexities of fields’ historical origins, to posit a neat timeline from Hoggart to the present. For one thing, there are many scholars who helped contribute to the formation of the field; Américo Paredes, for whom the University of Texas’s Center for Cultural Studies is named, immediately springs to mind. But, further, what I wish to propose here is a reconfiguration that opens up possibilities
and that draws on many threads rather than substituting one neatly packaged timeline for another. If there is one thing that my training as a historian has taught me, it is that timelines can too easily be tools for reinforcing power and that they cannot come close to revealing the intricacies of history itself. So, here as elsewhere, I think of history as a tangle of threads. Each thread can be a timeline of its own, but the threads intersect, they divert each other and twine together, and not one could be removed from the tangle without altering the entire mess. As Stuart Hall has said:

In serious, critical intellectual work, there are no “absolute beginnings” and few unbroken continuities. Neither the endless unwinding of “tradition”, so beloved on the History of Ideas, nor the absolutism of the “epistemological rupture”, punctuating Thought into its “false” and “correct” parts [...] will do. What we find, instead, is an untidy but characteristic unevenness of development. What is important are the significant breaks — where old lines of thought disrupted, older constellations displaced, and elements, old and new, are regrouped around a different set of premises and themes.\footnote{Hall, “Cultural Studies,” 57.}

Hoggart certainly shaped the field, but Hoggart’s contemporaries and colleagues, who cofounded the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies alongside him, cannot be left out, nor can the researchers who worked simultaneously and after them to expand the field.

Stuart Hall’s work has become foundational to thinking across an array of humanities disciplines; contemporary media studies is difficult to imagine without the work of Raymond Williams, and, as Hall points out, Hoggart and Williams, working simultaneously, are each radical in their own way. Angela McRobbie has effectively challenged the centering of popular culture around male pursuits by taking seriously the cultural practices and fascinations of teenage girls, and Janice Radway’s
work similarly takes up the women who read and find community and satisfaction in romance novels and the broader middle-brow reading culture.\textsuperscript{8} Angela Davis has forged a career that is itself a model of how scholarly work and political activism can form a palimpsest, focusing on issues such as racial justice and prison abolition.\textsuperscript{9} Gloria Anzaldúa worked across written forms to address the complexities of the borderlands through cultural, feminist, and queer theory. Andrew Ross’s scholarship on contemporary labor practices dovetails with activist work in the anti-sweatshop movement, in supporting student workers’ unions, in Occupy Wall Street and in related debtors’ movements, and in efforts to improve migrant labor standards in the United Arab Emirates. This is a somewhat scattershot list of scholars. There are hundreds who could be included, but what the scholars on this list have in common is a commitment to taking seriously the conditions of people’s daily lives and to valuing the possibilities of work that spills over the conventionally understood edges of the academy. Anzaldúa, for example, wrote children’s books, Paredes worked in both creative writing and folklore throughout his academic career, Ross has helped with Strike Debt, a “nationwide movement of debt resisters fighting for economic justice and democratic freedom.”\textsuperscript{10} In short, I would argue what binds these scholars together, what makes it sensible to include them on a single list is not necessarily influence, although they


\textsuperscript{9} For further reading, see Angela Davis, \textit{Women, Culture & Politics} (New York: Random House, 1989) and \textit{Women, Race & Class} (New York: Vintage, 1983).

\textsuperscript{10} \textit{Strike Debt}, http://strikedebt.org/.
are influential, but rather an interest in and commitment to the often experimental possibilities of critically engaged academic work.

If we must imagine a lineage for digital humanities, why wouldn't we imagine one that includes predecessors who have, themselves, fought for and forged a humanities that is enamored of possibility, of scholarship not just as monograph or journal article, but as poetry, as children's literature, as art, as political action? Of a body of scholars that includes not only those of us ensconced in the academy, but all committed to understanding and improving the human condition? Cultural studies is a radical critique, one that has had a profound effect on disciplines including history, literature, and anthropology, among others; if digital humanities were to become such a radical critique, think of the transformations, of the vital interventions, we could have. Such a lineage both makes possible and demands a digital humanities that is diverse both in the composition of its practitioners and in its intellectual concerns and output. At this point, I want to consider a handful of works by the scholars I have mentioned, considering the specifics of form, audience, and production. Then, building on the outlined works, I move to a proposal for what a cultural studies-inflected digital humanities might look like.

Some Existing and Theoretical Works

Cultural studies has produced a myriad of notable works. Here, I would like to briefly discuss a few, including Américo Paredes's “With His Pistol in His Hand”: A Border Ballad and Its Hero, Raymond Williams's Television: Technology and Cultural Form, and Janice Radway's Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature. These three books are in some ways significantly different from each other. The scholars who produced them are working in different home disciplines and in various types of cultural and institutional contexts, and have turned their attention to a somewhat disparate objects of study: a border song sung both north and south of the Rio Grande,
the television as medium, and the popular genre of the romance novel as read by American women. However, the three scholars and their books share a concern with the cultural practices and concerns of the daily lives of average people. All three scholars have also proven profoundly influential. Paredes’s work has shaped not only the study of folklore, but of borderlands, popular music, and regional culture; Williams remains so widely read and well regarded that the entirety of the 2014 Flow Conference was organized in response to and conversation with *Television*; Radway’s studies of women’s reading practices are a cornerstone for now decades of scholarship in literary, media, and American studies that take seriously feminized culture that is still so easily dismissed.

The strengths of these projects— their radical mixing of methods and willingness to work between and even outside of disciplines, their rigorous use of theory, and their commitment to taking seriously lived culture— can be found in many works of cultural studies, and are dependent upon an approach that is willing to push at the existing boundaries of scholarly work and question the often limiting conventional wisdom about which people and subjects are worth critical study. For example, Williams’s *Television* is important for its effort to understand how television worked at multiple levels and is a landmark text in part because he chose to look at a maligned and often dismissed medium. Similarly, Radway investigated the importance of romance novels, considering them as a form that facilitated pleasure, escape, and community in ways that are deeply meaningful for many readers; in doing so, she raised profound questions about what, exactly, makes literature valuable or worthy of study. And, Paredes was a tireless champion for Mexican American Studies. While “With a Pistol in His Hand” is Paredes’s first book, it is only one entry into a rich bibliography of works exploring the complexities of border culture.

All three of these works are concerned with cultural expressions often dismissed as “bad objects,” as things unworthy of serious attention, but in giving serious attention to television, romance, and the music of the border, they do not rehabilitate
these artifacts but rather demonstrate their existing importance and build a foundation for our understanding of broad areas of cultural production and practice. These three key books shifted critical understanding of culture and remain influential because of their radicalism even as, through the distance of years, they often appear decreasingly radical. This longstanding influence is a testament to the longstanding impact they have had, but also a call to action to seek out new boundaries to test.

Digital humanities has the promise of radicalism, and the field is often celebrated as disruptive, innovative, and expansive. But, much of digital humanities is deeply enmeshed with more traditional conceptualizations of what the humanities can and should be. We see many projects, for example, on the works of William Shakespeare and on the US Civil War. I do not wish to suggest these are bad projects; many of them are reflective of innovative approaches to topics of well established significance, and some, like Global Shakespeares, are making interesting interventions in the framing of particular topics and providing excellent resources to boot.

However, projects on these types of subjects are often among the best funded, and often have high levels of visibility along with that funding. For example, a listing of digital humanities projects that fall under the National Endowment for the Humanities’s “Standing Together: The Humanities and the Experience of War” speaks to the prominence of war history in US

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history and includes two projects (out of a total of seven) focused on the Civil War. Edward Castranova’s ill-fated effort to render Shakespearean society into a massively multiplayer environment, “Arden,” received $250,000 in funding and extensive media coverage. There are reasons to study Shakespeare and the Civil War, and certainly new tools make possible new and fruitful approaches to these topics. However, we should be careful that the digital humanities does not only reinforce the old canon of humanistic knowledge with its old biases, inequalities, exclusivities, and inaccessibilities.

**Digital Cultural Studies**

Cultural studies works like those I have discussed to this point are, by and large, far from digital, but they are both deeply radical and deeply engaged with the core questions of the humanities. It is in their radicalism, and in their interest in the daily concerns of people’s lived cultural experiences and encounters, that I see a useful model for reconceiving the digital humanities. Fundamental to this chapter is a consideration of what the digital humanities might look like as the child not of humanities computing, but of cultural studies. In this section, I turn to outlining what that might look like.

First, such a digital humanities would necessarily be engaged in radical experimentation: experimentation in research approaches, in publishing models, and in approaches to subjects. Second, a cultural studies-inflected digital humanities would be strongly engaged with the study of media and popular culture and invested in our understanding of the complexities of race, gender, sexuality, socioeconomic class, and other facets of cultural identity. Additionally, a digital humanities framed in this

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way would necessarily be concerned with effective communication and publication practices and ensure that the presentation of research is at least as sophisticated as the means in which that research is conducted. There are absolutely projects happening now that do work in this way — including some of the Civil War and Shakespeare projects already mentioned, and projects like Scalar have proven the value in experimenting with the presentation of even more conventional scholarship while also making room for radical efforts at constructing knowledge.\textsuperscript{14} Recent anthologies like Elizabeth Losh and Jacqueline Wernimont’s *Bodies of Information: Intersectional Feminism and Digital Humanities*...
ties and Jentery Sayers’s *Making Things and Drawing Boundaries: Experiments in the Digital Humanities* both showcase vibrant examples of what feminist and queer scholarship in DH can offer. This is not a situation in which we should throw the baby out with the bathwater, but rather one in which we should think carefully about whose practices and concerns we are drawing inspiration from and who our work serves and why.

A cultural studies-inflected digital humanities, a digital cultural studies, would always be concerned with its own political and cultural positioning and impact (see fig. 1). It would focus on lived culture, on daily life. It would be necessarily concerned with race, with gender, with sexuality, with cultural, political, and economic inequalities. And it should present as a field that includes the work not only of those of us safely ensconced in the academy, but of those working in the increasingly diffuse array of alt-ac positions and those so often, so vaguely, called “independent scholars”: researchers working outside the academy because they work in the growing pool of adjunct academic laborers or because they have no clear formal claim to academic legitimacy at all. There should be room for us to work alongside and learn from activists, teachers, journalists, writers, community leaders, and those who engage with significant cultural work not out of professional obligation, but out of personal devotion. Digital cultural studies should be responsive and inclusive, radical not because it can be, but because it must be. There are many approaches to diversifying fields, but changing our approaches, questioning the types of knowledge we produce and legitimate, is an absolutely vital one. Digital cultural studies should be a field that can not only, as Verhoeven demands, “show me a woman,” but also show me forms of knowledge production in which women are welcome and in which women’s concerns are valued. This is true not only, of course, of women, but of people of color, of queer people, of everyone who isn’t a “standard issue bloke.”
Conclusion

I began with a quote from Lewis Mumford because Mumford, so famously invested in the march of progress, so skilled in turning a sharp at the expense of those who he believed to be charlatans or crooks or dinosaurs, is an unsurprising convert to the power and potential of technological advancement. Those of us wading into the waters of digital humanities, even those of us who are cynics at heart, are often similarly enthralled. The Mumford proclaiming that “nothing is impossible,” is a marginally optimistic Mumford, but the degree to which he, and many of us, can be dazzled by technology, even technologies that “have fallen short of their inherent possibilities,” should give us pause. Perhaps “nothing is impossible,” but from the perspective of the twenty-first century, we can look back to technology after technology that, we were told gleefully, would change the world: radio, cable television, the VCR. I’m sure by now some readers are clearing their throats, waiting for me to warn against technological determinism, and this is my warning: technology, even technology that is leaps and bounds beyond what we might have imagined, is not inherently radical, and neither is its use.

Nothing is impossible, says Mumford, but I would argue that nothing is also possible — it is depressingly easy for new technologies to reinscribe our current inequalities. We can use new technologies to continue business as usual. For example, the VCR, at one point allegedly primed to revolutionize education, simply displaced the classroom film strip with the classroom VHS, another generation of often ill-conceived educational media, used long past the point where it was badly dated.\footnote{The VCR, of course, has been hugely important for distribution and production, enabling entire new areas of production, such as the “straight to video model.” My point is not that VCRs are not important, but rather that they did not achieve what many breathlessly promised they would.} Technologies on their own are not prone to radical transformation. It is in our use and deployment of technologies that we see that if not anything, at least something, is possible. Digital humanities can
and should be a field in which something is possible — where we can conceive of scholarship that is, for example, broadly accessible to the public, or that relies on large-scale collaboration to a degree that remains rare in the humanities, or that is responsive to the pressing cultural, political, and educational concerns of the broader population, scholarship that is agile, accessible, innovative. Digital humanists have the potential to produce work, in short, that evokes some of the most successful innovations of cultural studies while continuing to push beyond the limitations of existing research and publication standards and tools. The digital tools we are using are not inherently radical, but they have radical potential, if we can bring ourselves to wield them properly.
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@profwernimont (Jacqueline Wernimont). *Twitter.* November 6, 2014, 15:40 UTC. https://twitter.com/profwernimont/status/530384290392342528.


