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## Colonial and Postcolonial Digital Humanities Roundtable

OCTOBER 27, 2017 | BY: ROOPIKA RISAM | COMMENT

*Below are my Skype remarks from the Colonial and Postcolonial DH roundtable at the College of William and Mary's Race, Memory, and the Digital Humanities Conference.*

To my mind, the most significant contribution of digital humanities is to developing and sustaining the digital cultural record of humanity. We can debate about definitions and methods, but, fundamentally, the faculty, librarians, archivists, students, and those who work in galleries and museums who are equipped with digital humanities skills are uniquely poised to assemble this digital cultural record. They – we – do this by thinking critically about digital methods for humanities research and objects of knowledge and by building digital archives, maps, databases, and other digital objects that populate the digital cultural record.

Yet, as we engage in this work, we do so in the context of a politics of knowledge that hasn't always been hospitable to those outside a dominant culture. With a background in postcolonial and African diaspora studies, then, I am inclined read our digital cultural record through the colonial and neocolonial politics that have shaped the cultural record in its pre-digital phases. Edward Said, for example, has offered language for describing how power operates through colonial discourse, representation, and the construction of the othered colonized subject as an object of knowledge. Scholars of Subaltern Studies have pointed out the importance of looking beyond nationalist historiography to recover unheard voices in the cultural record. Benedict Anderson's work on imagined communities has identified the relationship between print culture and nationalism. And scholars like Gayatri Spivak and Anne McClintock have brought intersectional nuance to colonial cultural production through attention to race, gender, and sexuality. These critiques of the cultural record have

not gone away as the digital cultural record has been developed. The digital cultural record has largely ported over the hallmarks of colonialism from the cultural record, unthinkingly, without malice, in part because postcolonial critique has not made many in-roads in the practices of digital humanities scholarship.

In fact, I would argue, the dynamics of colonialism have not only been reproduced but are also being amplified by virtue of the fact that the digital cultural record is being constructed and disseminated publicly, online, in a digital milieu beset with its own politics of identity. As scholars of media and new media studies like Radhika Gajjala, Lisa Nakamura, and Anna Everett have pointed out, gone are the days when the internet could be theorized as a blank slate for identity creation – not that it was ever that space really. In fact, as the last few years have shown, whether through the #GamerGate attacks on women in the video game industry or the flocks of right-wing trolls that are attacking, threatening, and doxxing scholars of race, gender, sexuality, and colonialism, the digital cultural record not only must contend with the colonial hangovers from the cultural record but also the forces that are actively constructing its medium as a hostile environment where universities and the academy are under threat, right along with the knowledge we are producing and making available publicly.

It's tempting to think that the additive approach to the digital cultural record is sufficient for remediating its inequalities. When we look to many of the digital humanities projects that have been created, maintained, and financially supported over decades, they seem to have something in common – in digital literary studies for example there is the William Blake Archive, the Walt Whitman Archive, the Dante Gabriel Rossetti Archive. We might as well just call it digital *canonical* humanities because it would be more honest. This is not to say there weren't earlier interventions that were actively challenging the canonicity of the digital cultural record – Amy Earhart's book *Traces of the Old, Uses of the New*, for example, does a phenomenal job recovering a trend of digital literary recovery projects by African Americanists in the 1990s, particularly ones like The Black Poetry Page that are no longer extant. Digital historians seem to have done a better job on this matter than the digital literary scholars, since projects like the *Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database*, *Visualizing Emancipation*, and *Mapping Inequality: Redlining in New Deal America* are actively exploring histories of slavery and racism.

Yet, mere addition is not enough. I say this not to dismiss the importance of adding more voices and new stories to the digital cultural record. There is phenomenal, thought-provoking work coming out that is critical, like *Colored Conventions* or the *Recovery Project*

at the [University of Houston](#) that is recovering U.S. Hispanic literary heritage. These interventions are absolutely necessary – but they cannot be expected to bear the weight of representation in the digital cultural record alone.

And here's why: these projects are fighting the good fight of challenging the role of race and colonialism in the digital cultural record, where canons are being reproduced and amplified not only in the visibility and discoverability of knowledge but in epistemologies as well. The reification of the canon in digital form is a function of not only *what's* there – what gets digitized and thus represented in the digital cultural record – but also *how* it's there – how those who have created these projects have presented their subjects. Namely, are they presenting them in ways that rehearse colonialist knowledge production? Or are they recognizing the role of colonialism in actively constructing the digital cultural record and, quite directly, seeking to push back against it?

This points to the need for significant attention to how we are designing projects, framing the material in them, and managing the data that is part of them. This need was the inspiration for [Social Justice and the Digital Humanities](#), created in the De/Post/Colonial Digital Humanities course that micha cárdenas and I taught at HILT in 2015. Not wanting to be prescriptive, we framed this project as an invitation to help articulate the questions that we should consider when designing digital humanities projects – precisely so we can foreground the influences of colonialism and racism, among other forces, on projects as they are being designed from the ground up – ideally – or for reevaluating and reassessing design practices later. An approach like this moves us from placing the burden of representation on the addition of new stories and voices to the digital cultural record alone – a job that seems to have been undertaken in large part by women and people of color – to considering how we can avoid reinstantiating the colonial dimensions of the cultural record in digital form – a responsibility we must all assume.

I want to point to a project that is an exemplar for negotiating its own politics of colonialism: [Livingstone Online](#), directed by Adrian Wisnicki, Megan Ward, and Heather Ball. David Livingstone, the explorer, is a colonialist *par excellence*, and his abundant papers are now available through this digital archive. But there is more than meets the eye here to Livingstone Online. Its creators have not let the fact pass unmentioned that Livingstone is a troubling figure and that to create a digital project on him is to participate in a particular kind of politics that risks reaffirming the colonialist values of the digital cultural record. They recognize that they are, as the tagline says, “Illuminating imperial exploration,” but they do so while actively avoiding *glorifying* colonial expansion.

As they note on their [about page](#): “Livingstone Online’s goal is neither to praise nor condemn David Livingstone the individual. He was and remains a controversial figure. Rather, the site proceeds on the basis that Livingstone’s varied and vast manuscript legacy offers an unparalleled window onto key aspects of nineteenth-century global history and intercultural encounter.” I’ll be honest and say that as a postcolonialist, I’d much prefer a rousing condemnation but every project has its own goals. And one of the goals of this project is an essential intervention in the colonial politics of the digital cultural record: by avoiding falling on one side of the praise/condemnation binary, it explores the challenges of working with colonial materials explicitly and, in doing so, makes a contribution to the project’s stated goal of “conducting research in a transparent manner that invites critical interrogation and debate.”

The project articulates the complicated nature of Livingstone’s life – his contributions to cultural imperialism through missionary work, his abolitionist politics, the role of his exploration in the colonization of Africa. In “[The Theory Behind Livingstone Online](#),” the creators note, “Although no digital museum, library, or archive can redress such biases, Livingstone Online uses digital technologies to foreground the often lost hands, voices, and sources that shaped Livingstone’s work and writing.” This is not only a matter of content but also form, as the site is designed to encourage what the creators call “lateral, anti-hierarchical exploration of content in order to foster user-led interpretation over passive reception of authorized knowledge.” They also rely on a range of both historical and contemporary images to, in their words, “Replace iconic, singular representations of Livingstone with images that show him in multiple relations to the people around him.” They also provide contextual material on colonialism. Knowing, as we do, that as the digital cultural record expands, we will continue seeing the production of digital knowledge on the Livingstones of the world, Livingstone Online stands as a critical example of how to negotiate colonialist politics in material like this.

In an environment in which we know and recognize that there is simply not going to be enough funding in the world to redress the inequalities in the digital cultural record and that one of the vestiges of colonialism is the absences in the cultural record – the voices that weren’t recorded, for which we couldn’t create a digital archive or project even if we wanted to – project design, specifically continued interrogation of colonialism through project design – is an essential site of intervention in the epistemologies of digital knowledge production. And, put together, the two moves we have been making in scholarship – both the additive and the epistemological – hold possibility for remediating the digital cultural record.

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I'm an assistant professor of English at Salem State University and my research focuses on digital humanities and African diaspora studies.

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I have been given write access to the LibGuides.  
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4h

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My afternoon has been spent editing  
[@shree\\_thorat](#) [@latelyontime](#) & [@pwolsen](#)'s  
essays for the South Asian Review special issue  
on digital humanities and, wow, what an honor it is  
to get to work with them.

Nov 13, 2018

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Looks like a blast. Congratulations, [@elotroalex](#)  
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