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Navigating the Global Digital Humanities: Insights from Black Feminism

ROOPIKA RISAM

As the field of digital humanities has grown in size and scope, the question of how to navigate a scholarly community that is diverse in geography, language, and participant demographics has become pressing. An increasing number of initiatives have sought to address these concerns, both in scholarship—as in work on postcolonial digital humanities or #transformDH—and through new organizational structures like the Alliance of Digital Humanities Organization's (ADHO) Multi-Lingualism and Multi-Culturalism Committee and Global Outlook::Digital Humanities (GO::DH), a special interest group of ADHO. From the work of GO::DH in particular, an important perspective has emerged: digital humanities, as a field, can only be inclusive and its diversity can only thrive in an environment in which local specificity—the unique concerns that influence and define digital humanities at regional and national levels—is positioned at its center and its global dimensions are outlined through an assemblage of the local. This idea was at the core of my Digital Humanities 2014 talk, in which I suggested that accent is a fitting metaphor for negotiating the relationships among local contexts. Similarly, at Digital Diversity 2015, Padmini Ray Murray insisted, "Your DH is not my DH—and that is a good thing."Claire Warwick reiterated this idea in her DHSI 2015 keynote speech, suggesting that local institutions and cultures are critical to digital humanities practice. Additionally, in her talk at the Canadian Society of Digital Humanities and Association for Computers and the Humanities joint conference in 2015, Élika Ortega posited, "All DH is local DH." The insistent resurfacing of this theme at digital humanities conferences signals a critical need for sustained theorization of the relationship between local and global in scholarship and practice.

Taking the need for further examination of local–global connections within the digital humanities as its basis, this chapter clarifies the stakes of theorizing this dimension of digital humanities. I look to black feminist epistemology and its emphasis on intersectionality as a model for mediating between the universal and the particular and for attending to the tensions between local and global in the digital humanities. Examining the lessons for digital humanities to be learned from black feminism, I discuss the challenges of maintaining the threads that cohere the field on a global scale as well as the local specificities that enrich its practices.

As a multidisciplinary field of study changing the nature of scholarly communication, digital humanities faces not only the challenges of interdisciplinarity but also the difficulty of navigating the global scope of its practitioners. This scope brings with it thorny questions about how digital humanities practices are defined; how to decenter the dominance of the United States, United Kingdom, and Canada within the field; and how to make space for multilingual contributions to scholarship. Given the availability of digital scholarship online, the tendency of digital humanists to maintain a robust web presence, and a preference for making scholarship accessible, digital humanities seems like a radically open field. Yet it is not immune to the challenges that plague any interdisciplinary and global field: negotiating competing methodologies, proliferating institutional expectations, multiple audiences, and manifold practices. These are similar concerns that provoked

anxieties among black feminist scholars within the U.S. academy when critical theory began gaining currency in the humanities, and Barbara Christian's essay "The Race for Theory" includes a number of insights about the difficulties of negotiating difference that are relevant to the local–global conundrum within digital humanities.

In the late 1980s, black feminist scholars recognized that the sea change underway in literary studies within the U.S. academy raised concern that the hard-won gains of Black studies were in peril. Although black feminists had successfully created spaces for their scholarship in the academy in the 1960s and 1970s, they worried that the popularity of critical theory would eclipse their contributions. Understandable anxieties about the rise of "theory" generated rancor within the academy as neoconservative tomes like Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987) and Roger Kimball's *Tenured Radicals*(1990) accused literary scholars of brainwashing young minds, muddying distinctions between high and low culture, devaluing great books of Western civilization, and failing to promote democracy.

For black feminist scholars, theory presented challenges to their recognition within literary studies. Where would the specificities of African diasporic women's experiences—the unique confluence of race, gender, class, nation, and other identity categories—have a place in the decidedly Eurocentric theory that was gaining currency within the humanities? From outside of black feminism, this concern might seem unwarranted. For example, Marxist approaches to literature and culture are grounded in questions of capital and power, and postcolonial studies takes up the dynamics through which European colonizers racialized and othered most of the world's population—issues germane to black feminist work. Yet these approaches are not only situated in continental philosophy but also are nonspecific, taking as their basis not the historical specificity of women of the African diaspora but the broader issue of how power operates discursively.

Christian speaks to these concerns in her groundbreaking essay "The Race for Theory," arguing that the uncritical embrace of theory in the academy can be dangerous. Based on continental philosophy and rooted in European epistemology, she argued, theory emerged from the experiences of a dominant culture built on the subjugation of black people. As a result, the rise of theory required black feminists to communicate in a language fundamentally alien to their own; it risked prescriptive readings, restrictions on creativity, and less diversity of thought within the field. Christian did not view theory as dynamic enough to accommodate modes of thought that foreground intersectional analyses, particularly of race and gender. The term "intersectionality" was coined in 1989 by black feminist legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, who perceived that neither antiracist nor feminist movements adequately accounted for the unique needs of black women whose experiences are shaped by both race and gender.Intersectionality, she argued, could provide an interpretive lens to account for both. Subsequently, Crenshaw's term has been used more expansively to speak to the need for analysis that accounts for multiple axes of privilege and oppression, not only race and gender but also sexuality, ability, nation, and so on. But for Christian, this valuable lens was endangered by the rise of theory.

Nearly thirty years after the advent of theory, literary studies seem to be amidst another transformation—a digital one. There exist a number of parallels between the anointing of theory in

the humanities and the increasing interest in the digital humanities: both gained popularity in times of crisis within higher education; both engender concerns that method may profane the purported sacredness of literary texts; and both have raised questions about the place for complex questions of difference in the argot of the day. Christian's call for the importance of foregrounding difference and resisting flattening of specificities that emerge from practice offers useful guidance for attending to the tension between local and global articulations of digital humanities.

Among the challenges of negotiating difference in the global digital humanities is how digital humanities is defined at both local and global levels. Debates over the role of tools within its practices demonstrate competing local needs subtending the global. In the U.S. context, the way Christian represents theory, with its "preoccupations with mechanical analyses of language, graphs, algebraic equations" (53), evokes debates over whether digital humanities is overly focused on tool and method, to the detriment of critical analysis (Nowviskie; Posner; Cecire), or whether theories emerge from the process of building (Ramsay; Rockwell; Scheinfeldt). As Bethany Nowviskie has noted, the binary implied between "hack" and "yack" is a false one (see chapter 7 of this volume). Despite the significance of this debate in the U.S. context, the concern is a local one of varying relevance to digital humanities on the global stage. This is a case in which situating the issue of tool building in its local contexts heeds Christian's warning that theory not rooted in practice becomes elitist and exclusive. For example, the possibility of critiquing an emphasis on building within digital humanities is taken for granted in the United States. The choice to build—or not—is an unaffordable luxury in other digital humanities communities around the world. In India, for example, many local languages are underrepresented in digital scholarship because optical character recognition does not recognize them.Building new tools to account for these languages is crucial to cultural preservation—it is not a choice. In this case, critiquing the practice of tool building may be the privilege of digital humanists working with the Roman alphabet because they can use existing tools, even if they are aware of their limitations.Taking the local U.S. debate as a global one—as so often happens—elides the contexts that shape digital humanities practices in other communities.

Therefore, defining the digital humanities in a global context requires reflection on the plurality of circumstances that inflect local practices. This is not only a matter of tools but also one of method. As Isabel Galina has noted, "Methods that have worked effectively in one cultural setting may fail spectacularly in another (and vice versa) and certain reasoning of how things should work does not apply similarly in other frameworks" ("Is There Anybody out There?"). Another matter is funding for digital humanities scholarship—both a lack of funding for scholars from low-income economies and fiscal disparities between scholars working in research and teaching intensive institutions. Moreover, local cultural contexts influence practices; despite a general predisposition in the United States to the idea that information wants to be free, not all communities want their cultural heritage digitized, whether because of cultural expectations for how knowledge should be transmitted, as in many indigenous communities, or for matters of safety, as among trans* communities. The practices shaped by these cultural traditions or codes constitute local forms of digital humanities and must be accounted for in the move to the global.

The challenge is not to let hegemonic local forms—such as practices or debates taken for granted in the United States—overdetermine the definition of digital humanities globally. Here is another case in which Christian's insistence on the centrality of black feminist thought to theory provides an important model for negotiating difference in the digital humanities.Christian argued that critical theory was effecting a willful erasure of black feminist theory. She noted that black feminist scholars had been "doing" theory for a long time, but that those contributions were written out by poststructuralist theory. In the drive to articulate a global digital humanities, attention to the intersecting forces that shape local practices is integral to ensuring that definitions are not excluding existing practices that go unrecognized because they emerge outside of the tools and practices that have dominated international conferences and journals.

Another difficulty in conceptualizing the global contours of digital humanities is the centrality of U.S., U.K., and Canadian practices that define the field globally. Melissa Terras's infographic, "Quantifying Digital Humanities," maps locations of digital humanities centers around the world and suggests the dominance of these three countries (see Figure 29.1).

Quantifying Digital Humanities

COURTESY OF UCL CENTRE FOR DIGITAL HUMANITIES

Digital Humanities research and teaching takes place at the intersection of digital technologies and humanities. DH aims to produce and use applications and models that make possible new kinds of teaching and research, both in the humanities and in computer science (and its allied technologies). DH also studies the impact of these techniques on cultural heritage, memory institutions, libraries, archives and digital culture.

Digital Humanities is difficult to quantify. Here we present all available statistics reguarding individuals and resources, to explore the scope of the field.

PHYSICAL CENTRES IN DIGITAL HUMANITIES ACROSS THE GLOBE

114 Centers — in — 24 Countries

Norway, Sweden, Netherlands 2, Luxembourg, Germany 6, Hungary, UK 14, Ireland 2, Belgium 3, France 5, Spain, Italy 2, Iran, Serbia, Austria, Japan 2, South Korea, Taiwan 2, Australia 7, New Zealand, South Africa, Canada 11, USA 44, Brazil 2
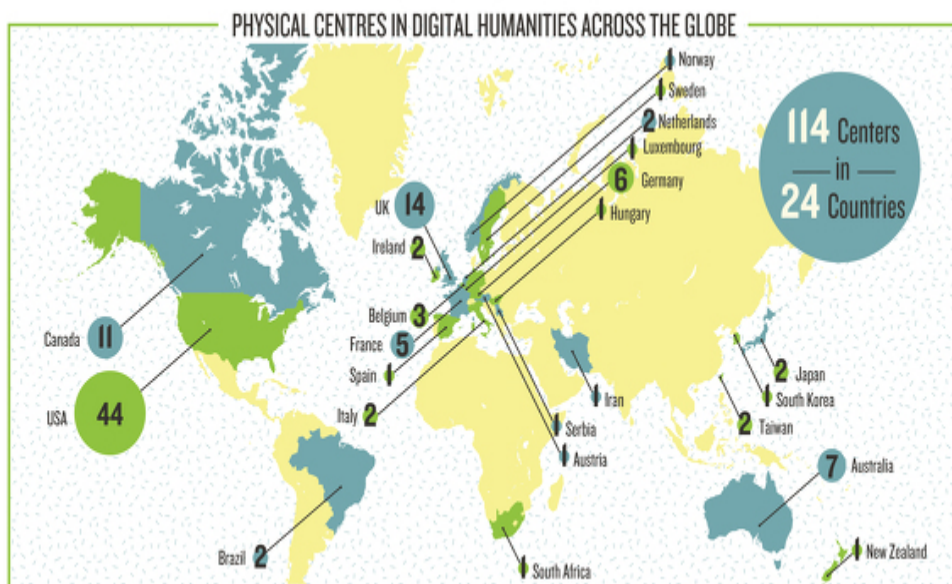
Figure 29.1. Terras's *Quantifying Digital Humanities*. Via UCL Centre for Digital Humanities Flickr page. Reproduced under a Creative Commons 2.0 License.

Just as Christian raised concerns over the ways that theory centered the heirs of European philosophy, relegating the rest of the world to the peripheries, so too, it seems, the centers of digital humanities produce their own margins. The dominance of these three countries in this map reflects a tendency of digital humanities scholarship around the world to take them as their centers. If global digital humanities can only be understood through its local practices, then the act of mapping these practices reveals its contours with greater accuracy. Such work is evident in Alex Gil's project *Around DH in 80 Days,* which offers a map that challenges perceptions of the global landscape and definitions of digital humanities (see Figure 29.2).

The project emerged from Gil's habit of sending colleagues e-mails with annotations of digital humanities projects from around the world. To launch the map-based version of the project, he crowdsourced digital scholarship from all regions, recruited regional editors, and facilitated eighty days of entries to plot a global vision of digital humanities. The map that resulted highlights contributions to the digital humanities that decenter the United States, United Kingdom, and Canada.

In spite of ongoing work to rewrite the maps of global digital humanities, a troubling trend appears in digital humanities citations: erasure of local difference. Staci Stutsman's analysis of digital humanities syllabi has demonstrated that the same handful of theorists from these countries (Susan Hockey, Lev Manovich, Matthew Kirschenbaum, Dan Cohen, Franco Moretti, and Stephen Ramsay) is being taught repeatedly, with little variation. These are, indeed, the same names that recur in digital humanities scholarship in South Africa, Nigeria, India, and South Korea, regardless of their relevance to local context.There is an imperative here to move from a logic that centers the Global North—advanced industrial and high-income economies—in digital humanities toward embracing the diversity of practices around the world and the intersecting forces that shape them. This instance recalls Christian's parallel between the race for theory within the academy with the colonial race for Africa, the systematic colonization of the continent by European powers in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. She imagines the world of literary studies being similarly overrun with continental philosophy, prescribing ways of reading for Africana literature that originate in methodologies derived from theory, not from within the African diaspora itself. In the global scope of the digital humanities, the dangers of such colonial dynamics are pressing.As Gil has argued, "The United States is very provincial in these matters" ("A Non-Peer-Reviewed Review").Yet such provincialism is troubling because the influences that define the digital humanities in the United States—or indeed the United Kingdom or Canada—are local but are often easily taken for global. The dominance of scholarship from these countries in the digital humanities demonstrates the ongoing need for locally situated scholarship and indigenous frameworks that theorize questions of the digital through the specificities of its on-the-ground practices worldwide.

Figure 29.2. Alex Gil's *Around DH in 80 Days*. Image from http://arounddh.org. Reproduced under a Creative Commons 3.0 License.

Another challenge to articulating a global digital humanities is the question of language. English has occupied the position of *lingua franca* in the field, despite the variety of languages spoken by its practitioners and welcomed at its international conference. Christian similarly notes that the rise of theory allowed for those well versed in its language to exert undue influence on the production of scholarship, marginalizing people of color in general and black women in particular. Although Christian's use of language in this case refers to the technical language, or jargon, of critical theory, a comparison is apt because she observes that such language effaces the possibilities for African American vernacular English within scholarship. Marginalization of languages other than academic forms of English is a critical issue in the digital humanities. Analysis of digital humanities journals, as Domenico Fiormonte has suggested, shows that "DH is monolingual regardless of the country and/or working institution/affiliation of authors" ("Towards a Monocultural [Digital] Humanities"). An implication, he suggests, is not just that digital humanities scholarship is being written in English but that English language sources are primarily the ones being cited. This compounds the hegemony of Anglophone digital humanities within the field. At the Digital Humanities 2014 conference, Élika Ortega and GO::DH organized a whisper campaign to facilitate translation of conference presentations. As Ortega notes, through the project GO::DH learned that there are significantly more languages represented at the conference than the languages in which presentations could be given (at that time English, French, German, Italian, or Spanish, now those five plus one language of the organizing country). Along with GO::DH, which is developing a Translation Toolkit, ADHO's Multi-Lingualism and Multi-Culturalism Committee is in the process of identifying and implementing practices at the Digital Humanities conference to negotiate the fraught question of language. This is certainly an area in which the tensions between local and global practices of digital humanities meet a practical challenge. However, as Galina has suggested,

digital humanists are well positioned to build tools and databases or design protocols to assist in translation. Indeed, this is an issue in which cooperation across ideological and economic differences will make the field richer.

The digital divides that shape the digital humanities do so unevenly. Local contexts matter and reflect linguistic, cultural, and social difference. Each location, as well as local communities within national contexts, is uniquely constituted in a matrix of intersecting factors that shape practices. The barriers to speaking of a truly global digital humanities are great, from significant differences in practices to the overdetermining influence of the United States, United Kingdom, and Canada to the dominance of English. As black feminist responses to the rise of theory suggest, the growing popularity of scholarly conversations risk flattening difference unless they carefully privilege diversity, multiplicity, and plurality. Only by defining, situating, and building on local contexts can we understand what digital humanities looks like at the global scale.

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