Reframing Digital Humanities: Conversations with Digital Humanists

REFRAMING DIGITAL HUMANITIES: CONVERSATIONS WITH DIGITAL HUMANISTS

JULIAN CHAMBLISS

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I always planned for a "final" project connected to the second season of Reframing History. Yet, the final form it took is mainly due to the great work of Dr. Samantha Cutrara. I'm grateful to her for including me in her Imagining a New "We" video blog. The video series she created mirrored my own as she sought to deal with a specific question and reached out to scholars to get their views. While my plans for Reframing History's summative object included some form of archive, talking with Dr. Cutrara and seeing the model she created allowed me to envision a different use for the elements I already created for the podcast.

I'm grateful to my colleagues in the Department of English at Michigan State University for recognizing the value of

podcasting as digital humanities work in our conversations within the department. I would not have finished this project without my colleague's support in the Consortium for Critical Diversity in Digital Age Research (CEDAR). They are always amazing sounding boards, sources of knowledge, and cheerleaders. It has been my experience that library colleagues' support can be a crucial factor in the success of a DH project. This project is no different. For me, I'm especially lucky because Regina Gong, the Open Educational Resources (OER) & Student Success Librarian at the Michigan State University Libraries, was gracious enough to explain the OER infrastructure within the library and provide support to create this volume. As is the way of all things digital, collaboration is at the heart of the project and I'm thankful for the many people who helped make this possible.

FOREWORD

Julian Chambliss wants to reframe the way we think about history and the work of historians in the digital age. A scholar of urban landscapes, "both real and imagined," he moves freely between traditional and more experimental/experiential modes of scholarly production. He studies community planning and development in real historic Black towns and settlements, yet he also explores the "Black Imaginary" and the "Black Fantastic" through comic books and popular culture. He's a self-described digital humanist, "chasing ideas" (as he puts it) across old and new media platforms. This e-book is a product of his restless, inquisitive mind, his faith in DH community-building, and his relentless commitment to "critical making" in the classroom and beyond.

So what is being made here? Anyone who has discussed history, technology, and digital public humanities with Julian at the AHA or OAH or SACRPH or HASTAC understands that they — we — all of us — are co-conspirators in his much larger, ongoing project. When Julian invited me to collaborate on *Reframing History – Season 1*, he explained that he saw podcasting as an emerging, yet largely untested, medium for scholarly communication. He admired what my UCF colleague, Robert Cassanello, had done with podcasting in the

classroom, and he wanted to use our project — a community study involving the rewriting of civic narratives — as the basis for a series of conversations about publicly engaged history in theory and practice. Pragmatically, he saw our *Reframing History – Season 1* podcast as an opportunity to teach himself how to create and share interviews with the broadest public audience, in the simplest possible way, while producing something of value for the public and the profession.

With *Reframing History – Season 2,* Julian saw an opportunity to expand the conversation from our community-based project into broader realms of digital scholarship. He invited fifteen leading practitioners in the fields of digital history and digital public humanities to discuss their work and how it might contribute to the "reframing" (pedagogical, methodological, epistemological, etc.) of History in the digital age. Rather than simply add another season of downloads to the Reframing podcast, Julian decided to explore another emerging format for scholarly production: the e-book. Those who wish to listen can still find the podcasts on [iTunes](), [Anchor](), [Stitcher](), and other commercial podcast platforms. Yet the e-book adds value in several ways. First, it ensures that the information and knowledge conveyed in the audio interviews will be preserved in transcribed/edited/curated form through the [Open Educational Resources of Michigan State University Libraries](), with the appropriate metadata and a Digital Object Identifier (DOI) attached. Second, it makes the podcasts more widely accessible — and searchable — by

teachers, researchers, and public audiences. Thirdly, it models a promising new way to transform serialized scholarly communication (podcasts, blog posts, Twitter threads, etc.) into a more stable, citable, PDF-able book format for purposes of promotion and tenure review.

Grouped thematically, the interviews presented in this volume reflect the critical diversity of DH theory and practice at the dawn of the 2020s. At the same time, they demonstrate the shared values — collaboration, experimentation, open access, etc. — that, as Lisa Spiro contends, define the field and unite its diverse communities of practice. Who better than Julian Chambliss, a historian of real and imagined communities, to ask where we are and what we are doing at this moment?

Scot French

University of Central Florida

September 9, 2020

INTRODUCTION

I see *Reframing Digital Humanities: Conversations with Digital Humanists* as a continuation of my community-centric digital humanities praxis. While there are some big ideas involved, I can trace the podcast at the heart of this project to 2017. My colleague [Scot French](#) and I were approached to rewrite the public history narrative for Winter Park, Florida. This request, from representatives of several cultural institutions in the city, was the direct result of years of community-based historical work. Understanding the African American experience in Central Florida, which I came to describe as the "Black Social World," inspired a public digital humanities praxis guided by an ongoing community engagement ethos. Some of the digital projects, such as [Advocated Recovered](#), a digital recovery project that gathers the remnants of a Republican newspaper printed by [Gus C. Henderson](#), an African American printer and community leader, easily fix within a broader set of black digital humanities ideas. As I reflected on the goals of that work, balancing community needs against measurable academic benchmarks was a struggle. Like many of my colleagues, I came to see my digital work within a generative scholarship model. I worked with student collaborators to create digital projects that

documented, preserved, and presented narratives linked to the black experience. Projects investigating the [Black Social World in Central Florida](#) highlighted Zora Neale Hurston's ties to the region, the strange lynching case of [Oscar Mack](#), and considerations of [urban development](#) in Central Florida.

Reframing History was inspired by the idea of providing a public narrative about work rooted in the community and relying on digital practice. Season one of Reframing History documented our efforts to tell that local history story and called my attention to how the challenge of definition around digital humanities, which is understood somewhat within academia, is a worthwhile public scholarship project. Thus, season 2 of Reframing History became a series of conversations with scholars about digital humanities. To create the list of interviewees, I relied on my own digital past and present. As such, I cannot argue that the conversations are encyclopedic or vital actors that might define digital humanities in meaningful ways were not omitted. If you are coming to this project searching for certainty, you will be disappointed. What I can say is, within the confines of the limitations of my knowledge and experience with digital humanities practice, this set of conversations touched on many of the issues I find to be crucial to understanding the values of digital humanities.

The conversations in Part I: Visioning Digital Humanities were with Kathleen Fitzpatrick, Rob Nelson, Sharon Leon, and Kathryn Tomasek and they offer through their experience

a framing of the hope for the digital to enhance the public's engagement with the humanities comes into view. Part II: Identity and Digital Humanities highlights how recovering voices and surfacing patterns in our collective lived experience can be achieved through digital means. Scholars such as Maryemma Graham, Hilary Green, Dhanashree Thorat, and Roopika Risam are doing that work and offer crucial perspectives on the ideas that drive them and the implications for public knowledge. Part III: Cultural Reproduction and Digital Humanities offer a way to think about how that public knowledge equation manifest as scholars utilize the digital to further their work. Concluding this work with a conversation with the members of CEDAR seems both appropriate and timely. Our discussion about what DH can do continues the process of visioning we are doing. I think we all recognize the impact of the COVID pandemic will be with us for years to come, and the place digital humanities will play in the future needs to be considered carefully.

As a transcript derived from a recording, I hope you will recognize that we took pains to try to maintain the integrity of the subject's words while attempting to make a conversation understood in written form. In the end, I think we managed to accomplish the goal of archiving these meaningful conversations.

PART I
VISIONING DIGITAL HUMANITIES

At the core of the integration of digital with the humanities has always been a public knowledge goal. In this section, the experiences of [Kathleen Fitzpatrick](), [Rob Nelson](), [Sharon Leon](), and [Kathryn Tomasek]() highlight how this idea has shaped the individual and organization experiences in digital humanities. Their experience calls our attention to how the turn toward digital was imagined to support public engagement with the humanities and the range of opportunities and challenges that have grown from this reality.

KATHLEEN FITZPATRICK AND PUBLIC DIGITAL HUMANITIES

"...what we needed to focus on was building a community that wanted to work together online..."

Kathleen Fitzpatrick

One of my earliest conversations was with Dr. Kathleen Fitzpatrick. Dr. Fitzpatrick is Director of Digital Humanities and Professor of English at Michigan State University. Prior to assuming this role in 2017, she served as Associate Executive Director and Director of Scholarly Communication of the Modern Language Association. In addition, she was Managing Editor of PMLA and other MLA publications. During that time, she also held an appointment as a Visiting Research Professor of English at NYU. She is author of *Planned Obsolescence: Publishing, Technology, and the Future of the Academy* (NYU Press, 2011), The Anxiety of Obsolescence:

The American Novel in the Age of Television (Vanderbilt University Press, 2006) and *Generous Think: The University and Public Good* (John Hopkinson University Press, 2019). She is project director of [Humanities Commons](), an open-access, open-source network serving more than 10,000 scholars and practitioners in the humanities. In our discussion, Dr. Fitzpatrick outlined why public humanities practice matters and we discuss how digital praxis can help academics engage with the public.

Keywords

Public Humanities, University, Digital Humanities, Community

The Conversation

Chambliss: Yeah. This season of Reframing History is all about Digital History. And one of the standard questions I'm planning to ask everybody, regardless of who they are, is how do you define digital humanities?

Fitzpatrick: I define digital humanities as that work that gets done in the overlap of the Venn diagram between humanities and technology. And that happens in a lot of different ways. On one hand, it can be using technological tools to do work of the kind that gets done in the humanities, asking the kinds of questions, whether they're historical or literary, or about art history, or what have you. But using

computational tools that do the processing of the data and that assist the researcher in the findings that come out of that work. Or, on the other hand, it can be asking more traditional humanities-oriented questions about the computing technologies that we're working with. So it can include digital media studies and questions about the ways that social media are changing how we interact and communicate with one another and so forth. My sense of digital humanities is that it's super broad and that it's a constantly shifting and changing field as both the tools shift and the questions shift, and we start to think about new ways of approaching the kinds of interests that the humanities has always had.

Chambliss: Right. Well, that's a great answer, and that gets me to do what I should have done which is start out by being like, you are Director of digital humanities at Michigan State University.

Fitzpatrick: Yeah. I've got that definition ready to go when I need it.

Chambliss: You have that definition ready to go, and I'm really impressed. But that actually also touches on my second question for you. I know that when we talk about you, when we look you up on the Internet and you're one of the... You reach a certain status where you have a Wikipedia entry. Did you know that?

Fitzpatrick: I did know that. I knew it because ... how did this come up? Maybe I googled myself or something like this and it came up as one of those funky little cards, and it had my

full birth date on there, and that really kind of freaked me out a little bit.

Chambliss: Yeah. I have a Wikipedia entry, too, so it's not … It's a thing. I feel like you reached a certain level getting a Wikipedia entry, like, wow, I have a Wikipedia entry. But your work in the humanities has a really long history, really going back to that earliest period of the work. And one of the things that I think that characterizes a lot of the work that you do is around this idea of community.

Chambliss: What do you think is at stake when academics create online communities?

Fitzpatrick: That is a really interesting question. And I came to this business of thinking about community and community spaces online in a kind of backward way. My original plan was to revolutionize scholarly publishing and to really think about new ways of disseminating articles and monographs online and full open access distribution and discussion around that work. And it really quickly became apparent to me that the thing that we were missing was not the tools to make that work or to disseminate that work. The things that we were missing were the people who needed to be present and willing to work in that way in order for work to get transformed that way.

It became really clear that what we needed to focus on was building a community that wanted to work together online, that had some stake in the kinds of conversations that they were able to have in that kind of space. As opposed to the

kinds of things that they were able to do in print through journals, in books and so forth. I think part of what's at stake for scholars in participating in and developing these kinds of online communities is the potential to open their work up in ways that make it more visible to people outside their immediate community of practice. And that can make it more approachable and accessible to people who might not necessarily recognize right off the bat. They might not assume that they're really interested in this particular kind of project, but might come to it through some roundabout way that leads them into really serious discussions of the kinds of work that we do as scholars.

I think part of what's at stake is making scholarly work more focal in mainstream conversations about really serious issues that we're facing. Yeah.

Chambliss: That is interesting because your new book is called *Generous Thinking, The University and the Public Good.* And like your previous book, this one has been open for a while for public review. Which means you have a manuscript out there, it's gone off to the publisher now and it's coming out. You just had a reading tour talk on campus here. But in that book, and I read the, there's an online version, you talk a lot about this idea of public intellectualism. What I would describe as public intellectualism, and the difficulties that academics have with that whole process. And I actually find this really interesting because I thought about this a lot in my own context. And I was really interested in that whole

chapter, but I really love you talk about how maybe, and I think about this in my own context. I think that maybe one of the things that's helpful for the new humanities. One thing that's helpful about the new humanities for academics is that it creates these structures where the academic part is still there, but it's also still, it gets to be public. Which is a really complicated thing, and it runs into these really big problems with open access, which I know you also talk a lot about. Can you walk people through your vision that you kind of talk about in terms of that public fear, that digital humanities fear and the synergy that's possible there?

Fitzpatrick: Yeah, yeah, absolutely. I will do my best in walking through this. One of the things that we've seen in recent years, and this goes back really to the '80s and the beginning of the Reagan Revolution in the United States is a real divide in public sentiment around higher education and what its purposes are, how it should be delivered, how it should be paid for and so forth. And we're now at a real crisis point, in which public universities are receiving minuscule support from the public for providing education. Public universities are required to do increasing sorts of philanthropic fundraising in order to maintain the services that they provide. And a lot of that happens because the public doesn't recognize the publicness of public education, right?

There is this sense in which education has become a private good, right? Rather than a public service. And part of my argument in Generous Thinking is that if we're going to turn

that around, if we're going to turn to the public and say, in fact these institutions are here for you and we are building strong communities and we are working toward a larger sense of public good, than what is just happening amongst us on campus, we really have to start making the work that we're doing on campus, publicly visible, publicly accessible. It has to be out there and it has to find purchase within, purchase being a bad metaphor, but it has to find...

Chambliss: Purchase in the third definition.

Fitzpatrick: Yeah, right. Exactly, a toe-hold, or some kind of grasp within the...

Chambliss: Traction.

Fitzpatrick: Traction, that's a much better word. Thank you. Traction within the public who can look at the work that we're doing and say that, I understand, that is worth supporting. Right?

I make the argument in Generous Thinking that there are some really key aspects to the ways that scholars work now that have to be made more public in order for this to come about. Open access as part of this, right? Nobody can care about your work if they can't get ahold of it, right? If it's in a journal that's only in top tier research libraries, nobody's going to find it. I mean nobody who doesn't have access to those kinds of institutions already.

Chambliss: Right. Just as a way of definition or clarification for people who might not be aware. When we say

open access, we mean a scholarship that is available in a free and open digital repository.

Fitzpatrick: Absolutely.

Chambliss: And they can look at several different ways, but probably the one that was most easily findable on the web is Academic Commons associated with either university or learning institution or some kind of professional organization.

Fitzpatrick: Absolutely.

Chambliss: Many colleges have Academic Commons and it's sometimes really complicated what can go in there. But what it is it's basically the work that has been published by the people who are on faculty. Whatever status it could be, talk about tenured faculty, whatever. Staff, that they are put there deliberately so it can be findable.

Fitzpatrick: Absolutely.

Chambliss: Many of these Commons are either through some sort of third party, or they're through some sort of like specially created apparatus. It depends on the institution. My previous institution paid something called BP press, they created our Academic Commons. But other larger institutions, state institutions tend to use, they throw out of the box or open source meaning they're free to use to create their own content.

Fitzpatrick: Yeah, so there are institutional repositories like that that are usually hosted by libraries, right? Where the faculty and staff, and sometimes students as well, at the institution can deposit their work and have it preserved and

have it findable on the web and have it freely accessible to anyone who wants to download and read it. There were also other routes to open access. Publications that are freely available and open on the web that are the official publication, right? Rather than, the version that gets deposited in the institutional repository. Like Open Library of the Humanities has a whole series of open access journals that are pretty fantastic. But again, the whole key to that is just making the stuff findable and accessible and free out there so that people can read it and care about it. That's one I think of this business of getting academic work visible and usable and cared about by broader publics than just those people who are already on campus.

But another part is really thinking about, about the register in which that work gets done. Right now, scholars write for each other and they write it in a particular kind of language that often closes other people out of a conversation, right? The more densely theoretical or critically rigorous, sometimes it becomes impossible for anyone who's not already indoctrinated into this particular kind of investigation to participate. It becomes really important, especially today, for scholars to think about publishing in a range of different forms.

We want to have these insider conversations amongst ourselves. I think it's still really important, this is how fields get advanced. But at the same time, we need to be able to give that elevator pitch or, right? Write the op-ed that tells

people why this kind of research in a university is important. Why it's not just insiders kind of talking about things that don't really matter in the real world. Because all of the work that we're doing does have real world consequences. We've just got to make the translation in a way to make clear what that importance is some of the time.

Chambliss: Yeah. One of the things that's really interesting, you talked about mainstreaming academic information and the complexities associated with that, and I have a lot of experience with this particular question in part because I do comics, right? Until people actually know what they are, right? My dissertation is on the gilded age of progressive era planning. No one cares about that. They care about the implications of it if I explain it a certain way. But if I just say, well yeah I wrote about the gilded age of progressive era planning, they're like okay. And so what I once explained to a student is that a lot of my work is either complicating what people think is simple or simplifying what people think is complicated.

Fitzpatrick: Exactly. Right.

Chambliss: Whenever I talk about comic books, they're always like isn't it a little bit more complicated than that? But I also know that when I was reading your, but talking about mainstream complaints that I heard, and I'm sure you've heard it too. If I talk to them for an hour, they shorten to 30 seconds and totally miss my point. Which I think lends itself towards this question. Like that's why you need to get out there and say yourself.

Fitzpatrick: Yes. Exactly, exactly. Rather than having the reporter between you and the public, right? Being able to make that point yourself.

Chambliss: Right. But I think the question, I think this will be an important question for a lot of academics, is how do you position this process, and it is a process.

Fitzpatrick: No. Totally, totally.

Chambliss: If you look at some of the things that happened over the last few years, I'm thinking particular African-American intellectual history society, they have a really strong, the people involved they have a really strong narrative about why would they do is important and how it fits within the broader process of being an academic. And they make a very particular argument, that the thing that you do here are a step on to this other thing that you're going to do as an academic. But that's primarily historians who I will often argue have a really long history of being in public square.

Fitzpatrick: Yeah, absolutely.

Chambliss: For other people doing things that are not necessarily quite so accessible, despite how you might talk about it, history is still something they know what it is. How do the other people who are involved in works of the humanities... Is this something that humanities has a special ability to do? Or is this like a broader process that every discipline can be involved in? Like this is I think a really important question.

Fitzpatrick: I think that at least certain fields within the

humanities have a special facility with this kind of movement between different forms of discussion. As you say, sort of making things that seem simple, more complex. But also making things that seem really complex, clear, right? It's part of the work we do in the classroom all the time is making that shift in different registers of the ways that we're approaching something. But I think this happens in a lot of different places. Scientists who are doing really complex, high-end theoretical work have to be able to translate that work into something comprehensible for grant applications, for instance. In order to make clear the importance of the work they're doing and its implications.

And there are also a host of scientific publications that are public facing, right? Scientists I think are getting more and more practice in this process of taking work that would be otherwise impenetrable and making it yet clear for the public. I think humanists in certain ways assume that everybody ought to understand what it is that we're doing. And I think we at times, even though it seems like we ought to have a particular facility with speaking to a broad culture, we need more practice at this. It's not something we're trained to do in grad school for instance.

You know, and so I'm thinking about, I mean you were talking about how historians have a long history in the public square, right? Public history has been a thing for a long time.

And there have been battles around it, right? Like trying to get it taken seriously. And is this really history or is this

advocacy or you know, something else entirely. I think there is a perception that something like public literary criticism doesn't exist, right? That this is that scholars don't write for the public when they're in literature fields. And in fact, I think first of all, it's not true. But secondly, it grows out of a, there's a fascinating argument by Gerald Graph about this and the history of the profession that he wrote that looks at this early 20th century moment of divide between sort of full logically oriented scholars in literature departments and critics. And critics were public facing and they were really thinking about ways of helping the public read and to figure out what to read and interpret the things that they were reading.

And that was seen at that time in the early 20th century as not being sufficiently serious. Right? For the field to have a place on campus. If it was going to have a place on campus, it had to become scientific. And so there's been a sort of pushing away of that public facing mode for a very long time. It's something that we really desperately need to recuperate and I think we're finding really interesting projects that are doing that recuperation right now. If you look at some of the journals like the Los Angeles Review of Books, like Public Books, there are lots of academic projects right now that are really attempting to enter the public sphere and thinking about criticism of the kind that might once have been rejected.

Chambliss: Yeah, that's a really important point. And it brings me to like my last question for you because as a faculty member here at MSU, you actually have a title and you're

Director of Digital Humanities at MSU, which I want to just say that we're in the Matrix lab here at MSU which personally to me is very exciting. It was awesome but it's also a place that I think is in a unique position in terms of both a burden and blessing associated with that. What does the DH look like here? It becomes a sort of like a benchmark around how we'll look everywhere.

Fitzpatrick: Absolutely.

Chambliss: So as Director, what's it look like here?

Fitzpatrick: That's a really interesting question you should ask me. You know, it looks complex. Matrix is one of many DH related centers and labs and programs and units and initiatives on campus and DH at MSU, the thing that I am director of is a sort of federation of all of those different things that are happening on campus. Trying to get them to share resources, work together, think about collaborations and really make the full breadth of what's happening here on campus, which is really quite extraordinary, known. Matrix is perhaps, the most nationally and internationally visible face of DH at MSU, but there's also the digital humanities and literary cognition lab in the English department. There's WIDE, which is in the writing rhetoric and American culture department.

Fitzpatrick: And I always forget the new acronym for WIDE. I was writing in digital environments originally, and now it's writing interaction and digital experience is what it is now.

There is, as you know, Cedar the Consortium for-

Chambliss: Critical diversity in a digital age.

Fitzpatrick: Thank you.

Chambliss: I'm actually in that one.

Fitzpatrick: Yes, you are. And there are more things happening besides, and so we really want to be able to make the full spectrum of everything that's happening here on campus known to make it much more visible and to really think about where we might build some bridges across these various entities to think about how we can we can work together on what DH might become here. One of the key things that I think MSU has going for it within this world of DH is that it is so publicly focused, right? That being the prototype for the Land Grant College in the United States, MSU has had this long standing, very public focused mission.

And so we're able to take DH research and think about how it can serve communities. Think about how it can build better connections across areas within Michigan and beyond. And that I think is really quite extraordinary. We're also thinking globally. A lot of the work that's happening here at Matrix and then of course our annual global digital humanities symposium are really attempting to think about how the work that we're doing with these new technologies is connecting areas that are able to work in collaboration and learn from one another far better than in the past.

Chambliss: Yeah. Well it's really exciting. I'm always thinking about all the things that are happening here at MSU. I always, like I can say, I always try to keep these conversations

short, but as a way of exiting, is there something that you think people should know that they don't know that you want them to know?

Fitzpatrick: I think the one thing that we didn't really touch on today that I would like to put in a plug for, if that's all right is humanities commons, which is now since I'm project director on humanities commons. It's affiliated with MSU and we're really thinking about the next phases of the project's development, right? Humanities commons is one of these sort of multi-institutional, multidisciplinary repositories and social networks that brings together scholars, students, practitioners from all across the humanities to share their work and communicate with one another. It's fully not for profit. It's directed by scholars and it's growing quite rapidly. We've got 15,000 members now and are really looking at ways that the network can develop in order to facilitate better engagement within our fields.

Chambliss: Awesome. That's great. Well, thank you for taking the time to talk with me.

Fitzpatrick: Thank you.

ROB NELSON AND MAKING DIGITAL SCHOLARSHIP

2

"We're having less and less impact upon our communities and our society, and being more engaged with the public, that's intrinsically not a bad thing..."

Rob Nelson

One of the earliest conversations I recorded for the podcast was with Dr. Robert (Rob) K. Nelson, the director of the Digital Scholarship Lab at the University of Richmond in Richmond Virginia. I first met rob working on the project called The History Engine in 2007. At that time the Digital Scholarship Lab was not as well known as it would become to the broader public. As the director of the Digital Scholarship Lab, Rob has been at the forefront of some of the most dynamic projects linked to the field of Digital Humanities in the public sphere. The DSL has developed multiple visualization projects under the umbrella of the American

[Panorama](#) (AP) project. AP is described as "a historical atlas of the United States for the twenty-first century" and it combines in-depth research with interactive mapping techniques. The maps on AP present data-rich visualizations that explore questions around redlining, migration, and electoral politics. As a result, the DSL has become a point of entry for many people learning about digital humanities.

Keywords

American Panorama, Race, History, Mapping, Topic Modeling, Visualization

The Conversation

Chambliss: All right, so my first question is the question I try to ask everybody. How do you define digital humanities?

Nelson:I try not to. I really give very little thought to Digital Humanities as a defined field. It's like everybody uses that term, so you have to use that term. It strikes me that now it's more just a... Matt Kirschenbaum says it's an instrumental term. This is a way of, in a neo-liberal university, being able to brand something that can get resources for humanistic research. I think that kind of makes sense. It's also like, I'd say it's like a community, right? DH is kind of the people who call themselves and say, "I'm practicing DH in some way." It's just kind of like a way of signaling, "Yeah, I kind of do something similar to what you do, and we have something in common.

We're part of the same kind of community of practice and going to be interested in each other's work."

Obviously, it's humanistic research that involves computation in some way, shape or form, either as a product using mostly the Web or, I guess, apps as a way of publishing and sharing humanistic content and research. Then increasingly, and particularly for Digital History, I'd say, and literary studies, using computation as an aid to doing research, to grapple with big data sets.

I don't have anything beyond that. I think it can be really overstated. I think it does do some useful work in bringing together people across different disciplinary boundaries, and then that is kind of a sort of interdisciplinary endeavor, but I think that can be overstated. I think some interesting work that's digital humanities isn't really humanistic.

It's humanistic in as much as it's rooted in some discipline, like history, right? Like Digital History. Sometimes working Digital History is more interesting because it grapples with disciplinary questions than is Digital Humanities because it defies any categorization within a discipline.

Chambliss: I would have described in the intro to this episode that you're a director of the Digital Scholarship Lab at the University of Richmond. I'm struck by your answer in the sense that some of the things you said are the things that someone who runs the scholarship lab has to say, especially around this question. It's interesting because my follow up to that question was going to be, and is, what would you say is

the value of digital humanities for students, for faculty, and for the public? Because that's the other thing about this. One of the classic things about digital humanities... I've taught an undergrad class in Digital History and I'm teaching a grad class now, and the first question I always ask students to ask themselves, "Does this need to be digital?" Like, this is a really important question. Does this need to be digital? Because all the heartache associated with doing this, if you don't need it to be digital, just walk away. Right? No one's going to blame you, no one will ever know. Just, does it need to be digital? They're really shocked by that, because they're like, "We thought you loved digital humanities." I love a lot of things. That doesn't mean you need to do it. Right? I like comic books, you don't need to like them. It's a question, right? And so the value is really complicated there, so this is really one of those questions that we don't talk about all the time, but we probably need to talk about a little bit. How would you say that? What's the value for students, for faculty, for the public, when we talk about digital humanities?

Nelson: Okay, let's take those in reverse order, because I think that's easier. The public is an obvious one, right? I mean, like one place that the Digital Humanities and Digital History seems to me like it's been a success over the last quarter century is sharing research. I guess when this kind of enterprise started, people talked about democratizing free... And in some ways that has happened. That's a lot of the work that my colleagues and I at the Digital Scholarship Lab do, as I think of the

projects we've done, particularly the ones on redlining, urban renewal, slave trades, all of them, but particularly I'm pointing out a few that were more successful than others, at least in terms of reaching broad audiences.

And that is one thing that Digital History and Digital Humanities has notable successes at, is broadening, getting people engaged, and sharing humanistic historical resources with not just students. For sure, you get these things used in both K-12 and undergraduate classrooms, but among community organizers and activists and just people who are interested in the history of their own neighborhoods and cities and nation. That seems to me like where, as a form, Digital History has been most successful in reaching that audience. It's really kind of hard to point at too many projects, because that's to faculty, right? It's hard to point at too many digital projects, projects that take the form of something that's online that has had historiographic significance.

And what I kind of find interesting is it does seem to me there is, I wouldn't say a categorical split, but the materials that are online and that we would point to as great examples of Digital History tend to be oriented towards the public. The ones that have had an impact for the profession or for the discipline, those use computers as an aid to research, but not necessarily take the form of something that involves a computer. You can read these things on paper. I'm thinking of Cameron Blevins's article in the JAH a few years ago on Houston and commercialization. What is it called? The

geographic imagination. I forgot the title of it. I'm thinking recently of Lincoln Mullen and his colleague whose name is escaping me. They had that piece in the AHR about the genealogy of state constitutions.

Both of those computations, we couldn't do that research, make those arguments, without computation, or at least you couldn't remotely, easily, but to get the argument you can pick up a copy in paper of JAH and AHR and read it and the computer was an input, but not a conveyor of that research.

The hardest one you ask, and I think the one you're most interested in, is students, and I have not figured that one out. This is a mission I have to make. I have never taught intro to DH. I've had a couple of DH components in my courses, but I have never figured out how to incorporate these methods in a substantive enough way for my tastes without compromising the humanistic or historical content of the course. If that makes sense, right?

Chambliss: No, that makes perfect sense, yeah.

Nelson: I use some digital stuff and often it's projects I've been involved in, so just last semester I taught a course on the American slave trade and I taught our map on the forced migration enslaved people, but that's just looking at a map. That's not teaching DH methods by any means.

And I haven't... But I'll back up and say, people who can do that well and can often figure out local projects, getting into archives, building digital collections, building public exhibits, like public Digital History courses, I mean, that's kind of a no

brainer to incorporate digital methods in those courses. The plus, obviously, is that most of our students are going to go on to be professional historians. It's great that we teach them how to think historically, but incorporating some other kind of harder skills, tech skills, that's not a bad thing. I don't think we should pivot and that should be the point of a history degree by any means, but it's not bad at all to have that.

Chambliss: Yeah, I think my answer to that, I would start with students because when I do digital things, I'm doing it just as you described, in the local context, and we're doing a digital thing to talk about the local context. Whether it's going into the archives or trying to piece together the history of a neighborhood and creating some sort of electronic repository around these primary sources, or is it something more mundane but still important, like transcribing the fragments of a long lost newspaper. The digital part there, I always tell students, the tool's not important. It's really the thinking that's employed here in the context. That's why I always use the terminology critical making. It's a critical process of making these digital tools, which I borrow from design thinking and some of the work that people do in Victorian studies and making stuff.

But it's interesting to hear you point to this dichotomy for faculty around the historiographical transformation versus the public and understanding, because it reminds me of how... This is one of the things, at least in my own personal experience, it's very true. I always point this out to people in

my many years working at Rollins College, that it's not as if the historical questions involved in the digital project are unclear. It's more that because we had a digital public narrative, people in the community could understand the question. They could see something that, if I just told them or said, "This is the history of reconstruction in the South and Florida's history is quite bad in this regard," it's like, "I don't believe you." Somehow you get students to like, "Well, here." They're like, "Oh, okay, I guess you must be telling the truth."

And it's sort of crossing this boundary between this academic world and the public world. That's really impactful, but it does run into this problem of why would you do it if you're an academic? Because your job isn't really predicated on the public knowing what you're doing. This is the other thing about this problem.

Nelson: Well, that's a bigger question about what we should be doing. Because we're bleeding majors. We're having less and less impact upon our communities and our society, and being more engaged with the public, that's intrinsically not a bad thing, it seems to me, and it's a potential one strategy for increased relevance in a moment where kind of the relevance of all humanities is sometimes not taken as self-evident.

Chambliss: Right, and I think that being engaged with the public is a perfectly reasonable goal. I think one of the things that you hear in conversation around DH is, and you alluded to this sort of neo-liberal, this is a stocky horse to

commercialize and marginalize humanities as a critical inquiry into how society operates and the material-driven framework associated with digital humanities, because there are things that you have to make. And I ran into this in a small way in my own institution, only in a sense that I was once asked are you going to keep doing this? And my response was, "Yes, I'm going to keep doing it, and I'm always going to do it about African American community." Because I was really framing things as a post-colonial DH project where I am trying to recover, explore, explain, document the Black experience in this community, and I'm trying to do that in a way that allows the Black community to have some ownership of it, which was a way for me to justify the work.

But like a lot of people in DH, I didn't get tenure on anything that was involving DH. It was more traditional stuff, which is a really interesting question and it gets to this other thing I wanted to talk to you about. I think a lot of people, when they hear about DH projects, tend to think of them using computers to do something, which you alluded to in your description, and you in particular through the Scholarship Lab, but you in particular, have done some really noteworthy things with something like topic modeling, where you topic model the Richmond Dispatch. I think that's actually one of the projects that, when people talk about topic modeling, they go, "Oh, yeah, Rob Nelson, topic model." Not saying no one else has ever used topic modeling, that's not

true, but it's really sort of this notable project, in part because I think it was easy to follow and it was easy to understand some of the conclusions that were able to be drawn from topic modeling that particular newspaper.

I think it's really important to ask you about this. What was your thinking when you hit upon this project? Was this a goal to try to spotlight topic modeling as a technique or was this something that was part of some broader strategy around DH and narratives around Civil War history, because I know that's a focus for you? How would you contextualize your goals around this seminal project? And seminal is a really loaded word. I don't mean to say… for those of you who have done topic modeling out there who are listening to this and you're like, "Oh, my God." I'm just saying when we talk about topic modeling, your project, Richmond Dispatch project is one that's often referred to for reasons that I just alluded to. Rob, how would you talk about that project in those contexts?

Nelson: Yeah, that was a well-timed project, is one thing I'd say. I mean, one of the reasons it has been noted by people who talk about topic modeling and its impact upon history and DH is that I got it out pretty early. That came out in 2010. How did I arrive at that? Everything I do is usually serendipity, and that is no exception.

Chambliss: No master plan?

Nelson: Here's the three things I could point out. Now they're eluding me. Three things that came together. One was I'd read Sharon Block's piece in Common-place. She had a

piece out 2007, something about that, where she was using an early version of topic modeling on the Pennsylvania Gazette. It wasn't LDA, it was LSA, I think. And she was trying, as far as I know the first historian to say, "This has some potential to understand some major phenomena over time and to grapple with big, digitized archives."

I'd read that and then I looked at her and I think it's David Newman who is her research partner, and I believe her husband, they had a piece that was cited in there. It said here's how you do LSA, and the math I realized immediately was going to be over my head. This is not something that I'm going to be able to implement on my own. I probably gave up 10 pages into that.

Here's the second piece of serendipity. I'd read that article and gotten interested in topic modeling broadly just a little bit before David Bly and David_____ released MALLET. When MALLET came out it was perfect. It's like this is what I've been looking for. This is a command line tool that I can follow the instructions, get all my text formatted, and dump it in. I can do this without having to implement the algorithm on my own or some topic modeling algorithm on my own.

Chambliss: Just for clarification, a command line-

Nelson: Yeah, I mean, I'm still capable of that. I have some technical chops, but I'm not a computer scientist and I'm not a mathematician or a statistician, so some of the really tough algorithmic stuff, not the area I work in. If I set my mind to it, maybe, but maybe not, too.

Chambliss: But even MALLET is, you need to have some proficiency.

Nelson: Oh, yeah.

Chambliss: But you don't necessarily have to be a theoretician. So that's what I mean. When you say command line, what does that mean? It means that it's like looking at DOS Shell, if you remember DOS Shell, right?

Nelson: And what it gives you, I mean, this is the difference, too-

Chambliss: No one remembers. That's a stupid example. All right.

Nelson: I mean, it will give you a ton of just text files out of it that have a bunch of numbers in them and you have to be able to do something and put those numbers... I put them back in to transform them into a relational database that I can put online and then I can build an app on top of that to visualize the topics that are discovered there. I don't want to, no, not everybody could just use MALLET. You need some knowhow even to use the outputs of MALLET, or even to just get MALLET to work in the first place. But the third piece of serendipity is that I'm a 19th Century historian who found myself at the University of Richmond, and a few years earlier my colleagues in the library had digitized the Richmond Daily Dispatch. They'd gotten an IMLS grant to digitalize the whole run of this thing. Within the library, I could walk to one of my library colleagues and say, "Can I have all those text files?" And he would give them to me. He would give them to anybody,

but it was really easy for me. I knew about it. It was just kind of perfect.

Those three things together. The Digital Scholarship Lab, we're a little more strategic. We have a little bit more of a plan. As director, I wouldn't say we have any master plan or anything like that. That's a loaded term to use. But in 2008, '09, '10, when I was doing that, the emphasis was more on the lab part, and by that, I mean experimenting. We continue to try and do interesting things. I think we've got a little bit more of... we're a little less just kind of screwing around at this point and we are probably much better at figuring out what kind of projects we want to work out and having them lined up and knowing where we're going with them.

I did not know where I was going with mining the Dispatch, partly because the method was so new. Which is why that project had as much impact as it did. This was an easy thing for people to see that you couldn't see just with the output of MALLET. For that project, I always try and just build things that I want to use and I wanted to understand the method myself and I wanted to understand the Dispatch better. I wanted to understand Civil War Richmond better, and so I kind wanted to see what I can do with this topic modeling, and mining the Dispatch was the first product of that.

Chambliss: Right, and as I say, I think it's still impactful, but your answer sort of leads me to my next question. I think much of the digital humanities work that's associated with the Digital Scholarship Lab I would describe as digital recovery

around US history. I say that because I think in particular a
project like American Panorama as a project that has lots of
little mini things underneath that umbrella. That's sort of like
a project umbrella. When you look at the project, I'm always
just struck by they're providing a kind of context to American
history that people know, clarification around the history that
people know, and it's part of the reason why they're so
impactful, I would argue, because there's already a kind of
baseline public knowledge around some of the things that the
projects are focused on in American Panorama, but you
provide a kind of illumination. You're recovering what people
might recover in a sense that academics might know some of
these arguments, but you're really visualizing it in a way that's
really compelling.

Because I think that project is so important... And that's
also one of the projects that I know that you guys get a lot of
attention for, because every iteration I'm teaching a class now
and I'm using Slate's list of best digital projects that they've
been doing and you're always on it. I know you say you have
no plan, but I feel like when you look at American Panorama,
there's a plan here.

Nelson: Yeah, that's where we've gotten a little more
intentional about the work that we do. History of American
Panorama. American Panorama, that was Ed Ayers's idea. I
don't know how long, but long before he even came to the
University of Richmond, I wanted to work on a project and
help propel a project that would use the web and use

interactivity of digital media or a spatial mapping project on US history. I will take basically minimal or no credit, because I don't really deserve any. It's all Ed. A few years, six, seven years ago, got a $750,000 grand from Mellon Foundation to help us start that project.

We worked with some great tech people out at Stamen Design in San Francisco, which was illuminating for me. It was like an education. I mean, I came out of that process much more capable of, or at least on a trajectory of being capable of doing really complex web applications, which we've done. They built the first four maps of American Panorama, which was our forced migration map, foreign born, one on the overland trails, and another one which people tend to ignore, which is canals. Don't ask me why they ignore canals, but [crosstalk 00:25:19] doesn't get a lot of traffic.

Since then, we've developed in house four other maps and really, in some ways, because of the topics, not because of the technical development, we have our map on redlining, a map that by far dwarfs everything else in terms of the amount of traffic and probably impact that any of these have had. We had a follow up to that on urban renewal. That was released a year and a half ago. Recently released one on electing the House of Representatives, and then a smaller one, which I think is kind of a fun little one, which is on travel abroad of secretaries of state. It's called executive abroad, so it's kind of America in the world, at least as its expressed through executive travel.

It's a massive project. There's a kind of preface to this, a

prequel to it, which was our enhanced edition of Charles Paullin and John K. Wright's Atlas of the Historical Geography of the United States. That was us doing our due diligence by looking at what had been done with the genre of the historical atlas to date. That was kind of the print model for us. We wanted something of similar ambition using digital media that Paulin and Wright had done with their 1932 atlas. It's proven to be more of an analog that maybe we wanted, because that took them, depending on how you date the work on that project, two or three decades for them to finish that thing. It was kind of a nightmarish project that barely got finished. We've got a long way to go, too. We're seven years into this thing.

I think saying they're maps is a big underselling them. Each of them is thousands, hundreds, thousands of maps. But, still, there's an unending number of topics in American history that we could and should tackle spatially to really make this atlas remotely comprehensive. Nothing is comprehensive, but we don't have the presidents. We don't have presidential elections in there yet. We have a very early project on that, but we can't have a finished atlas that has Congress and not the presidents. We can't have that. We've got to get churches in there. We're going to have to get agriculture in there somewhere.

Chambliss: Yeah, it's a great project because it can go on and on and on.

Nelson: It could be never ending.

Chambliss: Yeah, right, exactly, and it's interesting because

whenever I look at that project, again, when we talk about Digital Humanities, my experience is that, one, no one knows what it is. This is a thing, no one knows what it is. Going back to your original answer, that term is really broad. But once they decide that you do it, then you do it, and then they start asking you stuff. I've had a couple of conversations in my own institution where I was like, "Do you know how much money?" Or could it be like, "Do you know how much money? They have millions." I work alone with students. No, it can't be like that, because they need resourced to get a certain feel and look in order for them to hit this mark. This idea that an individual doing digital humanities versus a team doing digital humanities, which lab is a really loaded term in DH, and the Digital Scholarship Lap at UR is one of some known labs. It's a known entity.

Which gets at this other question that as, again, someone who is running a lab funding, more importantly the search for funding, is a very known thing. It's like an inside baseball thing for people who are doing the age. It's a problem, it's a challenge, it's an opportunity, depending on how you want to look at it, depending on the day, how you got out of bed. It's one of those things. As director of the Digital Scholarship Lab, you have captured, I would argue, some significant grant funding. How did that challenge vex you? Is it haunting you? How does that work?

I mean, yeah, you apply for a grant, but one of the things about grant funding that probably the public doesn't know,

once you get a grant, it's easier to get a grant. When you don't have a grant, it's way harder to get a grant. American Panorama is a great project, because it can go on forever.

Nelson: Yeah, but we haven't got anymore money for it.

Chambliss: What?

Nelson: And I don't think that's necessarily a bad thing. We haven't really searched for more money for it. I'm not discounting that money. That seed money was unbelievably important for us, right? And we could not work with Stamen. They were, frankly, expensive. I'll just leave it at that. It gets very expensive when you're working with somebody in San Francisco or Silicon Valley, and it was worth it, because they upped our game significantly, but since then everything is built in house. We work on next to no, my discretionary budget is next to nothing. We have a couple software things. That's probably the biggest thing is I spend a chunk of change every year on Carta DB so we can use that to simplify some of our workflows and don't have to host certain things here. I have been of mostly one mind. Let's say one and a half minds, because it's not quite two minds, about funding. Obviously one of the big funding agencies for people doing DH is doing it through NEH and ODH, the Office of Digital Humanities at the NEH. It has been a while since we applied, been a long while since we applied to anything from them. The reason is, like, A, I am in a really enviable position where I have a small staff and nobody's on soft money. I don't have to fundraise to my staff, which is great. It's like, oh, yeah, my God, I mean, the

stress people are under when you actually have people whose paychecks are dependent upon you getting money. I just, that gives me cramps just thinking about being in that. That responsibility is horrible. I don't have that.

Chambliss: And I think it's worth clarifying for people, a lot of positions in all research centers at academic intuitions are soft money, which means that they're grant funded. When the grants run out, the position goes away.

Nelson: Exactly.

Chambliss: And it's usually a small percentage of people who are hard money, which are faculty or librarians or staff people who are part of the institution's budget and they really rely on the ability of the director of the center to raise money, to write grants, to raise money, and almost all these truly massive centers... And I'm actually kind of shocked that you guys are all hard money, actually.

Nelson: Well, the DSL is less than three people, because it's me. I have a GIS analyst and project manager, Justin Madrin, and I have a visualization designer, Nate Ayers. And the reason we're less than three is that I'm now head of digital engagement in our library, I oversee digital collections and digital preservation. It's not like my time is split 50/50 between the digital engagement and DSL. I still lean towards the DSL because I do a lot of that, a lot more involved in the nitty gritty of that work.

Chambliss: So you're not a center?

Nelson: But it's not a big staff, right? We're not CHNM

with dozens of people. We're not even MITH, right? MITH's got probably three or four times our staff, as it should. It's a big research institution. MATRIX, I don't know how many staff there are at MATRIX, but I'm guessing it's bigger than the DSL.

We're modest, that's great. Coming back, one reason I've been hesitant about funding is, first, I don't have the stick of having to fire people. Having to fire people, that would light a fire under me to go get grant money. But the amount you get from NEH, by the time you write the grants and do all that planning, you're ready to go just get the project done and you turn it in and you wait months and months and months and months for them to evaluate it. Then you get it and there's a couple months wait before you start getting money, right? For us, I just like doing the stuff, not writing a grant so we can wait to do something. For us, it just never has made that much sense, because I'm not dependent on it. Administering grants is no small amount of time. Writing them and administering them for me almost mitigates the actual benefit of getting that money. Where one of the benefits comes in is, well, this comes back to the neo-liberal institution, too, or one way of saying you're bringing money to your institution. Your institution might care about that. Another way might be saying in a profession that's been defined by peer review and you're working in an area that doesn't have a clear substitute for that peer review process, grant funding can serve as a surrogate or a proxy for that.

You can point and say this is me being peer reviewed. This is me submitting my work to colleagues and other practitioners in this enterprise and they're saying this is good stuff and we're going to support it. And I don't have that, because I'm not on a tenure track. I wouldn't mind those accolades, but I don't need them. People who are waiting to come up for tenure or trying to get to full professor, that might help them to have that and be able to list that in their tenure promotion documents. For me, it doesn't matter.

One thing that I like about the DSL, and I feel it's not for everybody. We're kind of idiosyncratic. I never want to suggest we've figured this stuff out. I would never suggest that. At the same time, for us, getting grants has not been the only or even the, is pretty far down our list of priorities. Getting work done, that's our priority. I don't know if that makes sense.

I've got to come back to one more thing you said, because I think you raise an interesting point about groups versus individuals. Seems to me like some of the most interesting work that's happening in Digital History and the Digital Humanities is by younger scholars who are probably a half generation younger than you and me who know how to do this stuff and they don't rely on anybody. They just do it, right?

Chambliss: Right, right.

Nelson: They own their own stuff. Output some stuff. They got PhD's in whatever, history or whatever field. They interpret the results and they write things, and it's not like they need a team to do this. They just do it.

Chambliss: And that is, in fact, the norm. That's true. When you think about what the future graduate from a PhD program will be able to do digitally, they're going to be able to do a lot. They learn the tool early in their career and when they're doing their research, they're able to look at the data they've collected and they can tell us with that data, with the tools that they know. That's exactly what you see younger scholars doing. They're telling these tales and they have a dissertation that's associated with it, or they have the digital dissertation, which is incredibly something that is more and more common, which has its own set of complications, but it is a thing.

So, yeah, like at that place on MSU, that is one of the things that you see happening. You see a large number of students coming in, articulating in their documents, "Oh, I want to do this thing. I've done stuff as an undergraduate, I want to do this, I want to do that." And that was one of the things I would tell our undergrads at Rollins, you're going to need to know one tool. Just pick it, pick a tool. Doesn't matter what the tool is. I was super liberal about this. Tools are the things that you use to tell a story. You use a pencil, that's a tool, so just pick a tool and if you want your tool to be, I'm going to make podcasts, all right, then you need to learn editing software. Also, it's really about you need to be able to sustain this. You, yourself. You need to be able to carry this water all by yourself. There'll be no one there for you. You have to be able to sustain this.

Nelson: That's good advice.

Chambliss: If you can't do that, then don't do it. And they were always like, "You're being really pessimistic." I'm like, "No, I'm not, because everything costs money and if you do this thing with elaborate software that we have in our labs here with a 3D printer that we have here, you're not going to be carrying a 3D printer with you everywhere you go." Just the nature of the beast. That is the reality. But we're at a pivotal moment, because you have a lot of scholars, as you point out, who can do these things and we're only just now as a profession going, "Yeah, this is how we're going to value it. This is how we're going to evaluate it. This is how this count for tenure."

Can you do something digital for tenure is a huge question at a lot of institutions. They're making the transition. We're riding those things right now. For the most part, we're moving in the right direction, but the cost problem, that is a question, because I think increasingly the real question here is the thing that you do that's digital has to be truly original in order for it to count. It has to be this thing that is deeply grounded in your research, because the tools are there for almost anyone to make a really interesting visualization, and they may not know anything about visualization or the logic of digital [inaudible 00:41:24] or just hind thinking. They can just put stuff in and it'll produce this spectacular looking thing. It's really meaningful in order to distinguish yourself and that baseline becomes really complicated. I don't want to keep you too long,

but my last couple of questions, the reason that I'm able to talk to the great Rob Nelson is because of the History Engine project, which is a project that I started working on more than a decade ago. Yeah, more than a decade ago.

Nelson: Yeah, I think it was 2019. It was 2008.

Chambliss: Right, and this last semester at MSU I had students do entries in the History Engine. What's the status of the History Engine as a project?

Nelson: Okay, I want your opinion on this, too. This is actually perfect, because I was having a conversation. I used it in my class this last semester. I really like it. My students seemed to like it. They got more out of it than writing conventional four-page response papers. They seemed to really enjoy it and writing for a public and doing that kind of storytelling, I think they got more out of that little modest research assignment than they did out of something super conventional and a typical response essay, though I had them do that, too. But they seemed to like the History Engine better and seemed to get more out of that.

But I have been thinking about writing to everybody this semester and saying we're done. It won't go away, but we're not adding to it. Let me tell you what my thinking process on this. What kind of prompted this is somebody wrote me and said this isn't working and it's because we were using Google maps to show the locations where these historical vignettes took place. It had escaped me that they moved to a kind of

really expensive... the free version basically went away, right? Had to sign up and use a new library.

The library had been discontinued, so I had to recode it and then I potentially had to pay for it or find a different solution. It's like, "Crap." I got new stuff I'm doing that I don't really want to be working on the History Engine anymore and I've kind of forgotten how some of it worked. Any time you're revisiting a project that that's old. Kind of the amazing thing about it is it actually hasn't collapsed. Ten-year-old project that really we've done minimal maintenance on it and it just kind of seems to work, but I feel like that can't go on forever. My main reason I'm at least considering shutting it down for future contributions is I don't want you or anybody else to have this built into your class and then it breaks and we're struggling to get it, or maybe unable to get it working for anybody.

If you're going to offer this and say that people can use this in their classes, it's got to work. And I feel like we've dodged a bullet to date that it hasn't broken at some inopportune moment. And the other thing I guess I'd say about the History Engine is that it certainly gets a lot of traffic and it's gotten very modest but steady use. You can tell people are using it every semester, but I think when we were designing that, we thought there would be some kind of geometric growth in this, and there have not been. Five, six, seven people use it every semester, and it never is more than five, six, seven people. If it had a forward momentum, I would hesitate about shutting

it down, but it doesn't seem to. It's good, it's fine, nothing wrong with it, but it doesn't have a great deal of growth in it.

What do you think? I'm not talking about taking it down, I'm just talking about shutting it off so you can't log in and add stuff. What's there would remain there and be kind of a simpler project, but it wouldn't be a growing, living project. Would that break your heart?

Chambliss: First let me say, History Engine is a project where students in classes across the country work in an archive to write what were defined by Ed Ayers as episodes. So like narrative vignettes of history drawn from local archives. Many institutions, many organizations have archives, but most of us don't know what's in them. This is a way for students to go into archives, be historians, work with them, write these sort of contextual narratives that shed light on the past.

I've always enjoyed doing the project. A lot of my own thinking about Digital Humanities sort of spun out of it. There's something in the History Engine that I would be like, "Oh, I can do this. Oh, these fragments actually represent this," and built projects based on having worked with the History Engine. Yeah, there's a part of me that's like, "Oh, no, I don't want it to go away," but, yeah, I totally get what you're saying. When we started doing it, I think we started doing it 2007. It was 2007. I think that was the year, because this is how old it was. We got a grant from an organization that no longer exists.

Nelson: Yeah, NITLE, yeah.

Chambliss: Right, yeah. National Institute for Technology in Liberal Arts Education. Like, they're gone.

Nelson: Yep.

Chambliss: They died. From a digital standpoint, the History Engine is ancient. Right? It was updated, I would say significantly updated five years after that 2007, maybe around 2011, 2012.

Nelson: Something like that, yeah. We did a redesign and just kind of modernized it a little bit.

Chambliss: You guys put out a French version.

Nelson: We gave the code away to anybody, and so somebody in France wanted it and we gave it away to them.

Chambliss: But, yeah, it's no longer the new hotness that it was, right? It just isn't. Yeah, keeping it alive isn't a thing. I used it this semester because it's a great project to have an outcome that's rooted in archives. Like even now, I'm at an institution with the world's largest open collection of comic books. That means you have the largest publicly accessible collection of comic books in the world. So this semester we went in. Everybody wrote articles, well, episodes based on a corpus that I put together for one of the sub-selections all about superheroes. And it was a great project, because it got them to work with this material that we were going to work on anyway for another project involving digitization of those same objects.

I needed them to get familiar, I needed them to dig into that, I needed them to think about historical context, I needed

them to use primary and secondary sources to make sense of this material. The History Engine is a really great way to do that. It's a really great way to make a person stop and go like, "This object, this primary source, opens the door to numerous ways to talk about the past and I'm going to talk and I'm going to talk about it this way. This is why." It was super helpful, because when they came back later I'm like, "You know what you did in the History Engine? Do that, except add this stuff."

Because they had the right descriptions of objects that they were scanning and I wanted them to be historically contextual, like rich descriptions. Not just simply descriptions you would find in most databases. It's a book. The cover describes this first. In that moment in history, these things were happening related to this character around comic books and blah, blah, blah, this anniversary, blah, blah, blah, so that when someone saw it in digitizing and look at it and go, "Okay, it really connects to this moment in comic book history."

They wouldn't have been able to do that except that whole process of using History Engine to prime them to think about it in a certain way. To me, it's a great tool, but, yeah, if you got to keep it alive, it's just a thing.

Nelson: Yeah, it feels like a time bomb sometimes. It's going to go at some point and I got to defuse it before it, right?

Chambliss: Right, before it all goes to hell. The engine's going to blow, captain.

Nelson: Exactly. That's perfect. Yeah, I got to play with that metaphor.

Chambliss: I understand the problem, I do. I wouldn't want it to go away. I mean, one of the things about history over the years is that people will contact me about an episode that was written in the class. Students tend to enjoy writing them.

Nelson: Yeah, that's been my experience, too.

Chambliss: Because I'm often like, it's not a fictional story, right? The students love the idea of writing fiction for some reason, even if they're not English majors, but especially if they're English majors. I'm in the English department now. It's like, "No, it's not fiction. It's a narrative. It's a contextual narrative that's grounded in things. Don't make stuff up." I understand the problem, and in some ways it's a legacy project and this is one of the things that we all have to think about when we talk about digital humanities. What do you do when the technology moves on and you still want to try to maintain the project? How do you move from the active collection of data and actively doing it to a kind of legacy status? What does that entail? How does that work?

When I left my old job, I had a ton of stuff online. They were like, "This is all going to have to come down." Because I'm not there anymore. What do you want us to do with this? Do you want the files? I'm like, what do you mean it's all got to come down? It's a perfectly reasonable response on their part, they're perfectly nice people. We're going to crawl it and then it's going to come down. It's going to go into [inaudible 00:52:32] and it's going to be like, but it's going to look ugly in

there, I said. That is real. That is real. I understand. You should probably stop, but-

Nelson: Okay, good, good. That's the answer I wanted to hear.

Chambliss: Yeah, you should stop letting people put stuff in there.

Nelson: You'll get in an email, the last hurrah. Do it for the fall.

Chambliss: I think you should have a party for all of us and invite us up and we'll drink some champagne.

Nelson: That's what I should get grant funding for, little wake for the History Engine.

Chambliss: No, it's not a wake. It's a remembrance. When I go to the DSL website I want to see a little in remembrance sticker for the History Engine, and maybe some Civil War music playing.

Nelson: It's going the way of NITLE.

Chambliss: Because it lived a good life and it fought a good fight.

Nelson: It's had it's day.

Chambliss: No, yeah, I think you can-

Nelson: Do you ever get, you mentioned you get contact, and this is by students or do you get contacted by people who see? Because I get the complaints. Like this semester I got, it was super interesting exchange I had, and this is maybe unsatisfying for the person I was corresponding with. Somebody wrote to complain because there was an episode

that was from probably Ed Ayers's class a long time ago referred to the bravery of Andrew Jackson as he was fighting Native Americans. A Native American woman took a great deal of offense at this, understandably, and she said this is kind of celebrating him. I could have nitpicked and said you can be brave in a bad cause, but I didn't want to be nitpicky and said I'm with you on thinking Andrew Jackson did a lot of evil things.

Chambliss: Not brave things, yeah.

Nelson: Yeah, the displacement of Native peoples is a product of greed and racism that we should be nationally shameful, but I'm not going to take it down because it's written by students and unless something is, I wouldn't let hate speech stay up there, and I will take things down if they're just clearly-

Chambliss: Wrong.

Nelson: Like I want to give them the story. It can't be fake history, it has to be a reasonable, not completely erroneous version. Students make mistakes and I let some of those mistakes go, but if something's just totally off I'll take it down. But in this case it wasn't off. I wouldn't have said that necessarily, but I'm the editor. I'm not going to have that kind of heavy handed editorial control over the project. At the same time, I'm kind of with that woman in a lot of ways. I don't want to keep writing these emails. This is the other thing about the History Engine, is I have to defend this editorial policy, sometimes when I find it troubling to do so. Let's take it down

so that no other student says something that's going to offend somebody and then I have to defend it.

Chambliss: Well, you know, that particular case, I don't usually get complaints. I usually get people asking to follow up on something. Students typically don't necessarily contact me about it. It's interesting to third parties. I don't get that, but a lot of these are private. When you put stuff on the web and you're working with students as collaborators, you get a lot of complaints. I've gotten my fair share of complaints. I know, I get your interpretation. Is that interpretation wrong? Sometimes I just take it down because it's an investigative project. A lot of my projects are locally shared investigative projects and I don't need to argue with this person. Other times I'm like, that's an interpretation that's a little eh, but it's okay. With History Engine episodes, I will just unpublish them.

Nelson: Not everybody is as responsible about it or cares as much about the History Engine. That kind of investment in this, and that's always been a kind of tough thing, too. How do I put this? Because I don't want to be elitist, right? Because you at Rollins, Catherine at Wheaton, Lloyd at Furman.

We had good students doing this work and not everybody who's written has been a school that has as strong students and I still, because it's pedagogically oriented, I always make for any college, doesn't matter what college it is, an account. But it means we do have slightly varying degrees of quality in there and sometimes people, I don't think, they're not going

to unpublish. They're just going to let their students publish it and if it's junk, it's-

Chambliss: Right, yeah, right. It's complicated, because you want it to be an A paper. You want it to be an A paper that's in the History Engine and then you go maybe it can be a B plus, maybe it can be a B. Then after that, I'm like no.

Nelson: That's exactly my cut off. B or better it stays there.

Chambliss: Because then it's like adding injury to something that's already injured. I've kept you a long time. My last question for you is what's coming up for you in terms of Digital Humanities? What's on the horizon?

Nelson: It's actually kind of retrospective, I'd say. At the moment what we're working on, mapping inequality has been the most visited project that we've had. I'm an urban historian. You're more of an urban historian than I am, but it's had a big impact. People like. It's a window into wealth and racial inequality in their communities. It gets widely used. It's used in schools, it gets used by activists. The research that's come out of this thing has been kind of mind blowing, even on the spatial data.

So the next thing we're working on is we're revisiting NAS. We're going to add three dozen draft maps that aren't up there. Then the big thing, which kind of is a new direction, is we've gotten really close to having all the area descriptions for that transcribed. It kind of comes back to the beginning of our conversation, I'm interested to do some text mining on these. I've done a little bit of preliminary work using these, but we'll

have about 8,000 of these documents, each of them has about 50 data points. Not every one of them has that, but there's a lot of data there, and some really interesting things that we haven't explored that we'll use that textual material connected with this program. I want to make it possible for other people to use that, too.

So we'll obviously share the data eventually, and we're going to have search. Throw in a word. You can throw in smell. I've gotten interested in smell, because a window into environmental inequalities, too, but working-class people. They were near flower houses, factories, it stunk, and these get noticed. And so you can kind of get a sense of the environmental distinctions and inequalities within a city using these. We'll do that.

Then I don't know exactly where it's going to go, but I want to surface larger patterns and see if we can... We, and I mean that like us, and I mean that as the broader community when we share the data, can do something as important or as impactful of the area descriptions as we've been able to do with the spatial data to date.

The other thing I want to do, which we haven't, it's not disciplinary and it's about the medium and not the topic or the material itself. None of our maps work on mobile devices at all, phones, and this is when I want it to work. That's been okay, because we want a big canvas and a lot of these are so interactive and so much data that it just doesn't really lend itself to a little tiny screen, and I'm kind of okay with that. It

doesn't have to work on everything. This one, I want to work on everything, because I want you to be out in a community and be able to look at the area description for the area around a downtown that you're in and see the horrible things-

Chambliss: Thanks a lot for taking the time to talk with me.

Nelson: Thanks, it was fun.

SHARON LEON AND DIGITAL PATHWAYS

3

"...I feel like it's an impossible question to answer because my path and your path are historically contingent. Right? And the moments in which we were able to do the things that we could do and have been successful doing may have closed..."

Sharon Leon

Sharon Leon joined the Department of History at Michigan State University as a part of the Consortium for Critical Diversity in a Digital Age Research (CEDAR). Her research focuses on developing projects on digital public history and digital networking projects related to enslaved communities in Maryland. Prior to joining MSU, Leon spent over thirteen years at George Mason University's History Department at the [Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media](#) as Director of Public Projects, where she oversaw dozens of award-winning collaborations with partners from around the country. In addition to her role in CEDAR she also serves as a Director of the [Omeka](#) web publishing platform. In our

conversation, we talk about her path toward digital work and how it intersects with broader questions within the field.

Keywords

Digital History, Omeka, Public History, Graduate Education, Digital Learning

The Conversation

Chambliss: So the first question I always ask people. First of all, Sharon, thank you for joining me.

Leon: You are most welcome. I'm happy to do this.

Chambliss: The first question I always ask people is how do you defines Digital Humanities?

Leon: That's an enormously difficult question to answer. Because I think Digital Humanities is particularly hard to define because I, as somebody who comes from an interdisciplinary background have come into Digital Humanities from the disciplinary background of history. I think that I see it probably a little bit different than probably 70 percent of the people who think of themselves as doing digital humanities. But for me it is a process of asking and answering questions about humanities driven subjects and or topics using digital technology. I don't really fall down on the digital technology for research methods side or digital technology for publications side of the argument. I tend to play on both sides of that fence. I think both things are

important, but I think that the idea is that you're trying to do something new to see something new by using technology both on the research end and on the publication end.

Chambliss: Well that's a great answer. Like there's, I think arguably no wrong answer to that question.

Leon: Right. And that's not a very disciplinary driven answer.

Chambliss: Right. Other people have given similar answers, not necessarily discipline driven, but that's a great way for me as well to like to talk about you because I know that you got your undergrad degree in American Studies from Georgetown and then your Ph.D. in American Studies from the University of Minnesota. And I was really curious about this because I'm training as a historian, but I feel a lot of affinity for people who do American Studies because a lot of the stuff that I do, sort of like off end American studies, people do. I was actually kind of curious about this because I thought, oh, what was it about American Studies that spoke to you as a process. What drew you to it as opposed to the more traditional History. Because one of the things that as an undergrad I remember professors saying is don't get a degree in like, don't do like American studies just get like a pure disciplinary degree.

Leon: They said that as an undergrad? I understand people saying that for a graduate degree. For an undergraduate degree?

Chambliss: Well they knew I was going to go to grad school.

Leon: Right. No, that makes sense. The answer to that

question has nothing to do with digital things. And it was my introduction to college level work, came through something called the liberal arts seminar at Georgetown, which was a team taught two semester seminar where the first semester was, and it was on 19th-century revolutions. It was English and history in the first semester and philosophy and theology in the second semester. I actually never went, had a college experience that was not interdisciplinary. And so that the next logical place to roll out of the liberal arts seminar, which was basically European in focus, was into American studies because it was the major interdisciplinary program in the college at that time.

And so actually the subject area that I ended up being an Americanist was kind of arbitrary. Yeah. But it turned out that there was emerging digital work in the American studies program and so, and that was when the web was new, it was 1995 right. You could be a digital humanist by knowing some HTML. And that's where I started.

Chambliss: Right. And I knew that, and this leads me to my next question because I know that you spent 13 years as director of public projects for…

Leon: Rosenzweig.

Chambliss: Did that for history and new media at George Mason. This is actually, in my mind, one of those like prototypes of an alternative academic track. But you the already doing this before they started talking about you can do an alternative academic track.

Leon: That's right.

Chambliss: And it's also interesting to me because I think one of the things about this alternative academic track that we don't necessarily always play out as much as we can is how much digital is infused within it. I think there's actually one of the things that's really sort of interesting, it's both problematic at some level because we actually are debating what we mean when we say Digital Humanities and the implications of that. But it's also really interesting. Tell me about that experience and the conversation that you were having with yourself as that director at a center that arguably and how honestly I think of is like having defined Digital Humanities-

Leon: Or Digital History.

Chambliss: Yeah, Digital History in particular.

Leon: I would say Digital History more so than digital humanities writ large. Well, so what I would say is I did not become director of public projects until after Roy died in 2007. There was no public projects division until he sort... that was part of a plan. He set in motion in his planning for what would come after he was gone. Prior to that I was associate director of educational projects. I spent the first however three or four years working both on public history projects but also on projects, really centered on teaching and learning questions.

Chambliss: What were some of those projects?

Leon: Well, so there was a project called historical thinking matters, which was a collaboration with Sam Weinberg's group at Stanford. Sam, who wrote the great book Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts, about the cognitive

science behind thinking historically. And then eventually there was a clearinghouse project that was funded by the Department of Education called the national, well became teachinghistory.org.

It became just the URL, but it had a longer name and it was an effort to bring together everything that was the product of the teaching American history grants that had been a major funded project of the Department of Education for 10 to 12 years. Those and some public history projects, the object of history was about teaching and learning experiences around material culture at the national museum of American history. And so, but as far as an alternative academic track, I don't think that was what I thought I was doing when I took that job. It was a one-year postdoc to work on a history of science project called echo, which was about collecting the contemporary evidence of history of science so that we could do history of science work going forward in a born digital age.

It was a project that Dan Cohen worked on, and Tom Scheinfeldt and Sean Takat's that was funded by the Sloan Foundation because some of my dissertation work was about history of science. And my attraction to the center for history and new media was really simply that there were a thousand things going on. And I was sure that I wasn't going to be bored and I was a little bit worried I was going to be bored in a traditional academic job.

Chambliss: So let's go back. When you were thinking about that job, did you see like a job ad, did you see like a-

Leon: Yep. Job ad on H-Net.

Chambliss: Job ad on H-Net like so many people.

Leon: Like so many people, job ad on H-Net. But also I knew a lot of people who were very close to Roy. I did not know Roy himself before the job, but Randy Bass, who I had worked with at Georgetown was a very close friend of Roy's.

And so, Randy sort of put in a good word for me and my advisors in Minnesota all knew Roy from, basically, I think from the OAH and the AHA. The sort of not secret thing about Roy is Roy knew everyone. And he used those contacts. I mean he really sort of put feelers out across the board to try and get people who would be, I think willing and able to handle the multifaceted nature of doing large scale digital projects that were grant funded and deliverable driven and those sorts of things. And would be okay with going to work five days a week and not really doing your own work.

Chambliss: Right. So that means that when you looked at the job, you thought about your own skillset. What were some of the things that happened to you in grad school that set you up, you're like, oh yeah, oh, I can do this.

Leon: Right. Well, so it was actually having worked for Randy Bass as an undergraduate on the American studies crossroads project-

Chambliss: Okay. Which is a-

Leon: Which was the core site for the American Studies Association. It was one of the very first scholarly association sites. And what differentiated it from all of the others is, it was

super content rich. It had a lot of content that was created specifically for the site. It was not really like a brochure for the organization. It really was a rich content site about doing digital work and pedagogy and interdisciplinary work and stuff like that.

Chambliss: Would you think of it as a, the kind of model that we think of the day sort of like digital publishing, like it was an online-

Leon: Yeah.

Chambliss: Like, physical repository, peer reviewed or not peer reviewed?

Leon: It was not peer reviewed and it was all volunteer labor. But it then also sort of eventually rolled out into something called the visible knowledge project, which was a multi-year funded thing to sort of study as we were talking about Sam Weinberg's work the cognitive science behind teaching and learning in these areas and how digital interventions can help support learning. And that project was still going on when I went to see H and M, and Kelly Schrum who was the director of educational projects for the entire time I was there, was working on pieces for that. Some of the visible knowledge project got folded into what was the ever expanding sprawling site that was History Matters.

Chambliss: And so you got that job as was described as a postdoc, was very-

Leon: It was a one year postdoc. It was contingent.

Chambliss: Very common. Yeah, right. Very common sort

of academic slot that a lot of people get before they try to find their tenure track job.

Leon: That's right. That's right.

Chambliss: So, especially in the context of today, the idea-

Leon: Even more common now than it was then.

Chambliss: Yeah. But the idea that, oh, I'm going to stay, you did the one year and you have this thing that's on your CV. The opportunity comes up, well the grants going to go on. Do you want to stay? And they ask you, you say yes I do. But that's a really complicated-

Leon: Yes. Well, so and in fact that's not what happened. It was not that echo got renewed. It did. They hired two of us for that job. The other fellow was Josh Greenberg, who is now a program officer at the Sloan Foundation and had been the director of the first director of digital projects for the New York Public Library after he was at C, H and M., but they hired two of us. I was like an utility infielder and the very first thing I did was started working with Roy on a grant application for what would be the object of history. And so the first real thing that I did was write a grant with him. That was a three year grant that got funded. And so like we worked on this, of course, I'm going to stay and work on this, and I was working on historical thinking matters and they were multi-year projects and they were not things I wanted to get up and walk away from.

And as happened every year or every three months, there was another grant proposal to work on and they just sort of

started unfurling and nine years later, yeah, I switched over to the tenure track after year nine, which also won't ever happen to anyone ever again because it was a weird, weird turn of events. I didn't plan to stay, but I didn't plan to go. I just stopped applying for outside jobs.

Eventually it was like, oh well I can, it is contingent and it is soft money, but I know that I have the skills to make the funding appear. Together we can make the funding appear to keep us all going. And it was incredibly stressful, the more staff had to be supported. But because the team, we kept getting projects and it was, we got more projects. We needed to hire more people, which means we had to write more grants, which is-

Chambliss: You're on a-

Leon: Yes, yes, so it was a treadmill. It was absolutely a treadmill.

Chambliss: But in some ways, the ultimate version of the digital center model is what you were doing?

Leon: Yes, yes. Because there weren't, there were very few other digital centers at that time. There was the group that is now A.S.H.P. M was then too, but was only as HP and now it's got some other letters involved with it at CUNY and there was IATH at UVA.

Chambliss: Which is?

Leon: Yeah, Institute for Advanced Technology and the Humanities I think is what IATH stands for. VCDH which was gone now, Virginia Center for Digital History.

Chambliss: Ah, right.

Leon: There were a bunch of little centers that scattered all over UVA that got combined into something bigger eventually. And there was MYTH at Maryland and Matrix was forming here, but they were all pretty new. Matrix is the same age that the center is basically, on its way to year 25, but the rest of them were all a little bit newer. I think IATH was 1992.

Chambliss: Right. And of course, as you said you made the transition to tenure track and you were assistant first.

Leon: I had been reviewed, I had had an extern, basically an external review to get promoted to associate research professor while I was not on the tenure track. I got promoted without tenure and then I moved over to the tenure track, kept my title but had to go through tenure review.

Leon: Again. Because it had not gone through the college committee. It had gone straight to the Dean.

Chambliss: Right. And this is interesting because I know that he recently wrote a piece in your blog about LaDale Winling's piece that was in AHA Perspective about getting tenure and you made some great points about the more complicated nature of gaining tenure. And I really sort of at least mean tonight as well because I think it's interesting. Of course, you come to MSU this year as have I. We're sort of starting out at the same time here at Cedar and one of the things, and we are teaching together, that's another reason why she's willing to talk to me. Right? We're teaching the intro to the Digital Humanities certificate here and it's one of

the things that's really interesting to me to think about new academic professionals that people who are in graduate school now, what their relationship to digital will be. It's incredibly complicated as we literally talk about every weekend and sometimes within the seminar it's incredibly complicated.

And so for someone like yourself who has experienced what I would think of as many different faces of the digital landscape, how do you think about this process of being an academic who's doing digital work? What are the pitfalls, what I mean like you are a really successful example of this? And I think it's meaningful too, sometimes I'll talk to students who want to go to grad school and be like, and they'll say stuff like, I want to be like you. And I'm like, you can't necessarily do that because whenever you look at a professor, you're looking at a survivor.

I would like you to talk a little bit about how you see that landscape as someone who's been in it so deeply and from many different perspectives, right? Like as it's come up in the podcast this season already, we've talked a lot about funding. Funding is the dirty little unspoken word when it comes to the age, if you don't get funding, if you don't have a Rainmaker like yourself, right, you're screwed. Like it's not, it's not, it's not going to be good. Like that is no question there. We can debate a little bit, it's interesting because-

Leon: That landscape has changed too.

Chambliss: Has it?

Leon: Yeah. Well I mean I think it has, I mean it's like

this answer of what do you say to graduate students who are coming up now about what their potential path and career might be like if they're interested in doing digital things? To some degree I feel like it's an impossible question to answer because my path and your path are historically contingent. Right? And the moments in which we were able to do the things that we could do and have been successful doing may have closed, in a variety of ways. And so to say that we at the Center for History and New Media were able to survive on grant funding. 95 percent grant funding for a big staff for a lot of years was also because the amount of competition was low for that funding was much lower until we hit critical mass. And we hit critical mass of staff and skill, we could then easily and quickly respond to opportunities.

It's nearly impossible for anybody to start from scratch and get to that point now. Competition is super high for funding and nobody can afford to have the critical mass of staff and flexibility to be able to turn and pounce on those like, and there are just fewer things to bounce on that. Then there were, I mean there was a lot of energy and funding that is not as evident anymore. The Hewlett Foundation is not funding educational projects anymore. MacArthur is not funding, like the attention of some of the larger foundations have turned elsewhere. And so that landscape has changed too.

But I also think for graduate students who are coming up, I lived through a period where if you wanted it, you had to make it from scratch, which is why I run a software project.

But those software projects are in place now and exist now and so there are many more ready pieces that people can start to assemble to support their own work. To get further on their own without a major infusion from a national funder or something like that. But I think, it's always going to be different and there's not a chance regardless of sector that anybody could replicate the path that you took or I took or any of those folks who are of our generation took.

Chambliss: Right. The structure of academia now as you say, is more complicated. And I'm always struck by the fact that a lot of the work that defined it in humanities, and problematic to make these mass generalizations. But a lot of the work that defies Digital Humanities does come from centers that have a kind of infrastructure regardless of the size of the infrastructure. But they didn't have an infrastructure around producing digital projects. And one of the things was always, when I was at my former institution, people would talk to me about digital things because I would fall, I was the digital person and I was like, I don't remember when this happened. Like there was never, there was no ceremony, there was no process. It was just like a cumulative mass. And then like the title was branded upon me.

And they would about, oh can we do this because they see something online. I'm like, do you know how much money those people have? And like the technical support that they have, it's not the same. Right. The infrastructure around doing things digital is so much more complicated than we give a

credit to. And to me, this is one of the things that's really interesting to think about when you're talking to like a younger professional because as you say, there are tools in the toolbox they can go to and they can pull out and they can do something like we talked about this in our seminar. But one of the things that is real, a kind of dawning realization that I have is like everything that they do will be judged by the fact that there's a toolbox. And so therefore-

Leon: Did you make the best use of the things that and forever the question, what new thing are you bringing, right? What new thing are you bringing to the table? It may be a new method and sort of the kinds of funding that comes out of the Office of Digital Humanities at any age is by the way it's framed predicated on the notion of innovation. But the other kinds of funding and the other kinds of support that come for digital things are not necessarily funded on technical innovation. And so to keep the eye on trying to make something that is solid technically, functional, accessible, attractive, useful, but that really lets us ask and answer new questions about the humanities content is the goal, is to just keep those things in balance.

Sure there are going to be people who are going to be able to invent new methods. I think about the work that Lauren Tilton and Taylor Arnold are doing right now on distant viewing. As like, all right. That's, outside of Lev Manovich's attempt at it, that's a new conversation. They're opening up space for a new conversation, but there's not, that happens

every once in a while. But that doesn't mean that there is not enormous, enormous amounts of good work happening that are in established fields. And huge amounts of work left to be done in those established methodological approaches. And so yes, the toolbox is there and the question is how do you mobilize the toolbox as a scholar. To ask and answer those questions or in my case as a public historian to sort of have this conversation about shared authority and helping the public make sense of their own past and to ask and answer good questions about their own history and everybody else's history who may also be relevant to them.

Chambliss: Right. And the other part of this question, and you also had some insight into it, is like the infrastructure, right? We have people doing these little things, and again, this is something that's what happens at MSU. Like, oh, well if you're in CAL you have access to X, but if you're not, if you're in social science, whether they're totally different set of things...really sort of gets at to the unspoken question about resources and the IDH for individual sort of practitioners and for institutional practitioners. So you're the vice president for the Corporation of Digital Scholarship. A name I had not heard until you told me. A shadow organization-

Leon: A shadow corporation. It is not really a shadow corporation. It's not, I'd be happy to explain it, explain what it is.

Chambliss: But it goes to the heart of this sort of institutional infrastructure question.

Leon: Yes. The reason the Corporation for Digital Scholarship exists is that universities are not well equipped to provide long term financial and infrastructural sustainability to digital work. And you know through the course of about a decade, now 15 years at the Center for History and New Media. Some of the things that got made are major open source software projects. And because those pieces of software have become part of the infrastructure that the rest of the digital humanities community depends on. Omeka, Zotero probably eventually Press Forward, Tropey, Tom Scheinfeldt working on something new called Tube now. These pieces start to be part of what people depend on and there was no way to guarantee that we could keep them going.

One move was to establish an outside corporation to take fee for service, software as service. The corporation for digital scholarship is where your money goes. If you pay for storage for Zotero or you have an omeka.net account and then that money gets filtered back into pay the software teams that keep those pieces of the infrastructure healthy. And so people may ask us as well, is this a replicable model for other open source software packages? And I think probably not. I mean it depends. It really does depend on whether or not you have a viable service you can ethically sell at a reasonable price to people who need it, who are willing to pay for it. And that's not true of most open source packages. What you're paying for omeka.net and Zotero is you paying for the storage.

And the infrastructure for the sinking in those sorts of

things. And to not have to run the server yourself and to not, it's a convenience. It's a convenience, but not every piece of open source software is set up so that it has a piece like that that might be necessary. It worked for us. It has worked for those projects. It has been more than successful, thankfully, because it means that that development continues and we can continue to make that software viably available to the world for free.

Chambliss: Right. Yeah. And as a Zotero user, Thank you.

Leon: You're welcome. You're welcome. I take no credit for Zotero at all. I am as big a fan as everyone else. I discovered just the other day by looking at my ID number for the API that I was the 15th Zotero user.

Chambliss: Oh wow. Okay.

Leon: Yeah. So not as high as Dan Cohen or Josh Greenberg or Sean Takats. They were like one, two and three.

Chambliss: All right. The implications there about sustainability, which are, always use questions. I mean I think sustainability is a huge question for individual scholars, like can you sustain this? Whenever I talk to students about digital projects, like sometimes I'll say, when you leave this campus, will you be able to keep the thing that you just described to me going, especially if you're going to go into academia?

Leon: Or is there a viable way path to sunset it?

Chambliss: Yeah, yeah. There it is. Is there an end, and anyone who does DH will tell you it never ends. It never ends.

Leon: No, it doesn't. It's never done.

Chambliss: Question about the future of DH seem always

looming around the individual practitioner perspective and around it from an institutional perspective and whenever we talk about it, we never go, we always like to interpose those two, right? Like, can you get tenure with a Digital Humanities project, with a Digital History project? It is a visual question, but it's also an institutional question. They're intersecting in very particular ways. When you think about the future, when you think about like, oh yeah, these are things that really worry me in terms of the future. Again, I think about this from your sort of unique perspective, what comes to mind and don't worry, whatever you say, it's not going to be written in stone.

Leon: No, no, no, of course not.

Chambliss: No one's going to, no one listens to this podcast, so you're fine.

Leon: Well, I don't think that that's necessarily true. I think I worry just like everybody else about the amount of intellectual labor that disappears through digital decay on a regular basis, I really, really, really worry that sustainability is not like evaluation is not the first set of things that we start planning for when we plan for something new, because we're sitting in a library having this conversation. I have some ideas about the viability of dockerizing things so that you may run an emulator and run it over again. But that we're producing a lot of really insightful, useful, interesting scholarly work that has the chance on a regular basis of just disappearing. And part of the reason is that we have not invested in the system

of higher education in the resources that the libraries need to preserve and present the work that we create.

Kate Timer, who is a really well-noted archivist blogger, writes a blog called Archives Next and just announced the other day that she's retiring the blog after many years. It was a hub of conversation about the nexus of the digital and archives and all of those questions. And she's edited a whole bunch of books and is editing some of those essays into a book, but was kind enough to point to the fact that the University of Maryland had what web crawled the entire thing. It will continue to be available from their institutional repository. That's great because Kate's work is invaluable. And I teach it all the time and I was like, ah, it's going to go away and I'm not going to, I'm going to have to use the internet archives to find these sorts of things. But the amount of our digital life that depends on the generosity of Brewster Kale is enormous and that's a structural problem we need to fix.

And so while we're fighting about how much the next Elsevier subscription is going to cost, we need to be fighting on the other side about reinvesting that money in sustaining and preserving the scholarly production of the faculty at the individual institutions. Whether that needs to be institutional repositories on an institution by institution basis, I don't know. Maybe there are consortia ways to multiply those resources and make them more equally shared so that it's not only research one universities whose faculty's work gets preserved.

But yeah, no, I worry about that all the time, which is part of the reason why I'm super interested in all of the software we make, having output formats that are the lowest common denominator, digital formats. And so, it's the reason that Omeka S produces linked open data in a JSON feed, all your stuff right on back out. I don't ever want to make anything where people feel like they're trapped. And people are complaining, as it is, about the fact that content management systems sit on top of PHP and MySQL, that that's not minimal enough for them. And I, it's not, but we get some advantages and some multipliers to actually having a database at your disposal in those situations. It's always a tradeoff of investment of resources and functionality.

Chambliss: All right, well I think that's a good place to end. It's always great to think about the future and be like, oh, that question is not yet solved. And of course when we talk about Digital Humanities and Digital History, perhaps those are even more important questions to think about, who's going to solve that. But I really do want to thank you for taking the time and-

Leon: You're most welcome. Happy to talk with you.

KATHRYN TOMASEK AND ENCODING DIGITAL HUMANITIES

> **4**
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> "...we had an opportunity... to learn TEI and to figure out whether it would be useful to bring TEI into the classroom. And so, what we figured out, the archivist and I was that in fact, asking students to do transcription and markup, which is what you do with TEI, you transcribed the document and then you apply the guidelines to mark it up. That gave students an opportunity to practice close reading in the kind of way that history majors really sort of need to learn how to do, but it's hard to teach them..."
>
> Kathryn Tomasek

Kathryn Tomasek has been exploring the use of digital tools to enhance student learning since 1992. She began using XML compatible with the <u>Text Encoding Initiative</u> guidelines in assignments requiring the transcription and markup of primary sources in 2004. As part of the <u>Wheaton College Digital History Project</u>, students in her courses do original research with documents from the founding period of the college. Tomasek's research project, Encoding Financial Records, received a Start-Up Grant from the Office of Digital Humanities at the National Endowment for the Humanities

in 2011. In this episode, we spoke about TEI, teaching, and complexities linked to Digital Humanities.

Keywords

Wheaton College, Kathryn Tomasek, Text Encoding Initiative (TEI), Alliance for Digital Humanities

The Conversation

Tomasek: I'm Kathryn Tomasek, I'm a professor of history at Wheaton College.

Chambliss: Well, I want to thank you for joining me. The first question I always like to ask people is: what is Digital Humanities for you?

Tomasek: Okay, this is where I say defining Digital Humanities is really hard and people have spent a lot of time and ink working on that. So, I really like to defer to other people who've done this stuff and I really like Kathleen Fitzpatrick's definition that incorporates both using digital tools to examine traditional humanities materials and questions, and then asking traditional humanities questions about the things that make up our digital culture.

Chambliss: Okay. I've, spoken with her and she said exactly that [and that it] also is digging into the fact that the Digital Humanities community is a somewhat small.

Tomasek: That's very much the case. But there are plenty of people who would be willing to talk to you for a full hour

about their definition. I just happen to think that it's really cool to be a historian now because there are these neat tools that can help us ask new things about old stuff.

Chambliss: Right. And I think one of the reasons that I wanna talk to you is because of your really groundbreaking work. Like you were an early participant [in] TEI and TEI initiatives. And for a lot of people, that terminology isn't gonna mean a lot, but for a small segment of people, it's going to mean a great deal. Could you define what TEI is for people?

Tomasek: Sure, absolutely. I have to say, I appreciate your saying I was an early participant, but it's been around for 30 years and I've only been a historian for 30 years, [so] I'm gonna contradict you just a tiny bit. In fact, the 30th anniversary of the Text Encoding Initiative, that's what TEI stands for, was marked with the TEI receiving a big prize from the Alliance of Digital Humanities Organizations in 2017. It's the Antonio Zampolli Prize. Professor Zampoli was a major figure in the development of literary and linguistic computing from the 1960s. He was a really enthusiastic a supporter of the things that came together to make Digital Humanities, the joint international conferences of the—I can't even remember what this stands for. ALLC. It's [the Association] for Literary and Linguistic Computing and the Association for Computers in the Humanities. Our national conference started in 1989 and it's what we now call DH, and professor Zampolli was a prime mover in the TEI. There was an 11-year project and then they established the text encoding initiative consortium. And I sort

of happen to be the chair of the board of directors of the consortium right now.

Chambliss: Can you tell us what TEI stands for and what [it does]?

Tomasek: Okay. The main project of the TEI is maintaining this thing called the TEI guidelines for electronic text and coding and interchange. These are guidelines that define and document a markup language for representing structural renditions and conceptual features of texts. The guidelines focus—not exclusively but mostly—on the encoding of documents in the humanities and social sciences and, in particular, on the representation of primary source materials for research and analysis. So that sounds kind of to me like what historians do, right? I should also say that the guidelines are expressed as a modular extensible XML schema. People who don't know about markup languages may not know what that means, but XML is like what's behind every Microsoft office database. Extensible markup language. The guidelines have detailed documentation and they're published under an open source license.

Chambliss: For the layperson, basically what TEI allows you to do is create electronic editions of primary source documents for simplification, right? I like that. That's a super simple location and I recognize that but someone's going to have to be like, what does that mean?

Tomasek: But somebody has to simplify it and I'm really bad at that, so thank you.

Chambliss: Right. This is really important because it's not just simply that TEI allows you to make [an] electronic version. It's also a stable approach to this. I've taught an intro class to Digital Humanities; I'm teaching one right now, a grad course, and I taught undergraduate too. And students always think electronic things are very stable and we have to go through this whole thing where like, no, they're not stable. Right? It seems stable because, when you look at it, it's there. But, it might not be there.

Tomasek: And it doesn't work anymore.

Chambliss: Yeah, exactly.

Tomasek: I have stuff that I can't get information off of. It's just there. It's that nice coaster.

Chambliss: Right? Yeah, it's an object that I could hurt someone if they break into my house, but I can't really use it.

Tomasek: Like an old iPhone. It's a great glass brick.

Chambliss: Right! An electronic form can become obsolete or can become unusable and I suggest people who are listening to this and thinking about this [to] go to this thing called the Wayback Machine and type in the address of any website you use today and look at the earliest version of that website. Recognize, you know, the internet has changed so much. And because it's changed so much, this idea of some sort of stable form for presenting something on the web is not a small exercise. It's a really important exercise. And TEI is, I would argue, probably a form at the heart of that.

Tomasek: Yeah. No, absolutely. And I would say when

you're working in the TEI, you're working in XML, and XML is not something that renders beautifully on the web, right? If I have an XML file and you click on it, what you'll see is a tree with a lot of angle brackets, so you will see the marked up stuff. One sort of cautionary thing about XML is that it has to be transformed to be pretty. I'm on the web because the web is expressed in HTML, which is called *hypertext markup language*. But the XML documents are—and this is what you're getting at—archival forms of the scholarly edition [of], I would say, whatever text or manuscript you're working with. And the thing about the archival format of them is that the transformation can be changed as the browsers change.

Or as, you know, we moved from HTML and all that kind of stuff. And I think what many of us learned back in the '80s [in regard to programming the web] when we were using word processors that don't exist anymore. I can't access my dissertation electronically anymore. I always point people to this great book by Neil Stevenson from the '90s, it's called *In the Beginning was the Command Line* and it's about being an author and having written things you access anymore. And it's just funny because Neil Stevenson wrote it, but one of the great things about the archival XML in the TEI guidelines is that, if you've got the archival edition, then anybody can come along at any point and make it work in HTML 37, you know, when we get to that version.

Chambliss: Right. And the TEI initiative is the governing body at some level to these formats [and] forms.

Tomasek: Right, exactly. You need to think about how the web works. There's the W3C, the Worldwide Web Consortium—they make standards and the standards that are agreed [on] by the WC3 are why the internet works. So, I just need to say one thing, that the guidelines are not explicitly a standard in that kind of way, but they are widely accepted internationally as defining best practices for markup. This represents texts and manuscripts and vertical scholarly editions and keeps them in an archival format so they can be accessed in the future. That's a future-proofing thing that we don't talk about enough.

Chambliss: Right. This is one of the things that's really important, another part of the bigger debate about the humanities. It is humanities, but it is not. One of the things about the TEI initiative and other initiatives too [is] they require a bunch of people and many of these are institutions across borders. We need to agree on this, otherwise this won't work, right? So, TEI is, I think, one of the prime examples of a big academic agreement maintained by people across the world. It is quite an international group.

Tomasek: It is, it is.

Chambliss: And part of that cooperation [is] it just was future-proofing, right? Like, we want this moment to maintain itself in the future. So, on some level, [it's] one of those invisible cooperative agreements that's really integral to academic digital projects. But you wouldn't know unless you really were paying close attention. I'm willing to bet that

almost no student that walks into an undergraduate classroom [knows] TEI. If I say the word "TEI," they will think I misspoke. They will think I was trying to say TI. We would need to have a whole conversation about [how] I'm not talking about the rapper, [I'm] talking about the digital form and that would be a great teaching moment, but indicative of the fact that it's one of these hidden infrastructures of the digital landscape.

Tomasek: Yeah, it's funny, we're a small part of the small community of the Digital Humanities and so we might seem a little bit obscure. I was at a conference once and presenting, and the chair of the sessions said, "And she's published in the journal of the TEI," and I didn't even know that existed. Absolutely. You're right. Kind of hidden.

Chambliss: The hidden nature is another reason I wanted to talk to you because you've spent a lot of time with this project. You spent a lot of time with what is essentially a tool. And I really admire the wording because you've done stuff with students and you were working at a small college, and I used to work at a similar institution. You were working explicitly with the financial records of Wheaton College and the reality was, when people talk about financial records in TEI, they are talking about your work. What was that like? Because it seems like it would be a really complicated exercise.

Tomasek: Well, 15 years ago, I was working with the archivist at the college where I work, and she had a chance to buy some journals that had some pocket journals. So, this

is before we got to the financial records, but this is the background. This is how we got to TEI. She had a chance to buy these pocket diaries that had been kept by the woman who was married to a member of the family that formed the Wheaton Female Seminary in the 1830s, which is the organ that became the institution that became Wheaton College. And we had also just had an opportunity to, through some grants, ultimately from the Mellon foundation, to learn TEI and to figure out whether it would be useful to bring TEI into the classroom. And so, what we figured out [is that] the archivist was in fact asking students to do transcription and markup, which is what you do with TEI.

You transcribe the document and then you apply the guidelines to mark it up. That gave students an opportunity to practice close reading in the kind of way that history majors really need to learn how to do, but it's hard to teach them how to do that kind of close reading so that they can do their own research. Right? I always joke that the pocket diaries were the easy stuff and we ran through them really quick because there weren't very many of them. Then, these people just kept (the people who belong to the Wheaton family who founded this institution) a lot of their account books. In fact, Mrs. Wheaton kept every canceled check for the entire period she was financially independent. She was a widow for 40 years.

We have 40 years' worth of canceled checks, which is more than I want to deal with and we're not gonna go there. But she also kept really meticulous cash books that I hope we will get

to eventually. What seemed like the simplest of the documents was this daybook, which is sort of part of the system of double entry accounting that Laban Maury Wheaton, who was the son of this family, ran in Norton, Massachusetts between 1828 and 1859. A daybook has dates and the names of people who came into the store, and a list of the stuff they bought and how much it costs. And if he extended them credit on the left-hand side of the page on that line where the transaction is, he made a note of the page in his ledger where he kept track of credit, where you can find more information about that person's credit relationship with him.

I didn't know enough. This is always the best part, right? This is how you get to learn things. I know enough to know that it was going to be weird and hard to use. A tree structure, which is what the TEI is to express this information that is actually in a tabular structure in these account books. So, I messed with it a little while myself. I sent out a bunch of messages to the TEI list and I got messages back, saying things like, "Yeah, I was thinking about that for a while," and "Yeah, I could, it could work."

At one point, I was talking to, what do we call them, a program director at the Office of Digital Humanities. And we were talking about an idea that I had had for a possible startup grant and she didn't like that idea. And so, then I said, "Well, okay..." So, then, I've been working [and] thinking about this stuff. And she said, "Oh, that is so cool." [Sometimes you never know] what the cool stuff is until you talk to somebody.

We started getting grants to figure out how to do this stuff because, even though there were places in the guidelines that could hold the kind of information we wanted to be able to express from the accounting records, it turns out that there's more to figuring out what your data model is [and] what it actually is you're trying to express or that's not right.

What the document expresses [is] what people were doing so that then you can express it in a digital way. And I'm really fortunate to have a colleague in Austria who was working on the same problem at the same time that I was, and we didn't know each other existed until we started seeing each other's work at the international digital humanities conferences. And this is someone who works on a different kind of thing that you need on the web to help the machines make the kinds of connections that can come up on the web; the things that come up in the box on the right-hand side of your browser when you Google something like "Walt Whitman," right. This colleague of mine was working on what's called an ontology, which is a kind of graph representation of how that information looks, the information that's in an account book. . . . So, part of my story is that the reason I might seem boss to other people is because I get to talk to really cool people who are really smart. I've worked with a lot of smart people, sure.

Chambliss: Most people wouldn't necessarily have thought of putting students in that space. One of the things is that, once you work with students around DH—even though we often talk about them being digital born—they're actually

quite, well, they have a lot of anxiety about digital tools. They are users, not makers.

Tomasek: Consumers, not producers.

Chambliss: It seems like anything involved in TEI would be a huge challenge for a lot of students. But you worked with them semester after semester, right? Like, it wasn't one semester and you were done. It was actually multiple years.

Tomasek: Yeah, and the best work we've ever been able to get done. So, what I'm able usually to do in the classroom is do some introducing and, hopefully, if I'm lucky, reduce the anxiety level about the angle bracket. I imagine trying to teach people something like Pearl or Python. I can't do that myself. I'm lucky if I can do this, this thing that's sort of pseudo programming called X query. But in the classroom, what's worked really well in this introductory way is to do workshops where I am not the only instructor; it's always a collaboration between me and the people in the library, who have expertise in technical tools and digital pedagogies and those kinds of things. The thing that some colleagues might get worried about is we spend classroom time on these workshops, having the students do the work of the transcription because, guess what, paleography [and] being able to read handwriting cursive and sloppy cursive handwriting from the 19th century is not an easy thing.

You have too have many eyes looking at this and saying is it short for [a] bushel. You know, [that] kind of a thing. But then students have also expressed how important it was for

them, for the out-of-classroom work that they were doing, to know where the librarian's office was so they could go get help outside of class. And I think that's been really cool because even better than the workshop model has been the possibility of taking students who have had that little bit of an introduction during a semester-long course—to work together in groups over the summer, to do the transcription, to do the markup, and to go through the process.

They learn that collaboration is a really good way to work, that it's okay not to be able to be perfect at every piece of a task. They get an opportunity to spend a long time with the source. We've had a couple of really great experiences. For instance, when the students were working on the pocket diaries, they got really involved. This was a really long time ago now, but they got really excited about the people they were finding names of and they started going off into the graveyards in Norton, Massachusetts, and finding birth and death dates and all that kind of stuff, which was very cool. In the summer of 2016, I had four students and they were working so well together that they completed a full transcription of this 200+ page daybook in seven weeks, which was amazing.

And there's something else I was going to say about their work: how they developed. They see the text editor we use allows you different views. There's a view that shows you all the angle brackets, but there's also a view that's much more clean-screen. And what I saw them doing—and I teach them to do this—but they developed their own sort of style of

working their own workflow, I guess, is the way to say it. They would switch back and forth between the angle bracket view and the more clean-screen view. And what I thought was really great about it was that this was like, their math and they were very comfortable with all of this stuff by the time their seven weeks was over. And you know, when you think about the project you're still in, you're still sort of involved in it in different phases in different iterations. But one of the things that's really interesting is, because you are at a small liberal arts college and you're doing digital humanities work or you've been able to—

Chambliss: I think [you] touch on that [in] your previous answer, some of the ways your work has changed; the sort of flow of being a teacher, having students who are involved in the landscape. But then there's also this question of like, what does it matter that you're doing this right? I mean like, in some ways, you're doing this project that's about your school [but], when you're writing it up, technically you're writing up about TEI. You're not necessarily writing history articles. This is an important distinction here.

For people who are listening, Digital Humanities means lots of different things to many people, but it's heavily influenced by literary studies. So, that's one really defined narrative within digital humanities. Ed Ayers talks about generative scholarship associated with doing Digital History. And this is a really complicated question because your work is very technical. It's not as technical as, perhaps R, but if you know anything about

R, then you might understand. It's not Mallet, it's not statistics, but it is a clear contribution as you outlined. When you write about it, you're writing in a TEI journal, you're not writing in the *Journal of American History*. You are not writing in *American Historical Review* (AHR), which really gets at this question that I know that you really have been very involved with, the question of the rise of digital in history and how do we recognize that? How do we note that? And again, your career gets at this question. You have spent a lot of time thinking about this. I'm sure there are people who would say she's not doing history. She is not publishing in history journals. She's not doing history and I'm not okay with this.

But you've also been very much involved with a conversation within the profession about, how we think about Digital Humanities. How do we think about the digital process and digital scholarship? I want you to talk a little bit about that because I think that's a really important part of the landscape around digital. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Tomasek: Where do I start? Okay. One of the things you're referring to is the fact that Ed Ayers invited me to be on the committee, this ad hoc committee that the American Historical Association put together. We worked in 2014 and 2015 to develop a set of guidelines. Gosh, I just seem to do guidelines all over the place, don't I? Guidelines for the professional evaluation of digital scholarship by historians, such a 19th century kind of title. That was a huge thing because it was the first time we had ever had that kind of thing

in the context of the historical profession. I have always felt like the Modern Language Association was 10 years ahead of us because they had developed [those] kinds of guidelines for literary scholars about a decade earlier. And one of the things we talked about in the committee was how our guidelines had to be slightly different.

They're mostly aimed at helping people on tenure and promotion committees, including senior colleagues in history departments and administrators, deans, provosts—those kinds of people. Helping them understand where digital projects in history fit in the context of traditional ideas of what history is. For a long time, one of the recommendations about digital humanities was: don't do it if before you have tenure. And I made a slight mistake. I thought having tenure would make it okay for me to go ahead and do a digital project and that slowed me down for promotion. On your own campus, one of the big challenges of doing digital work has to do with educating your senior colleagues and administrators. And that's not nothing, I guess is what I would say about that.

And being able to point to the guidelines [now] is really useful. The American Historical Association also has a working group that continues to be a reference point for people who want to be able to say to their chair, for example, "This is how a digital project fits and should count." We talked a lot about counting, right? So, I think I'm very proud of having had a chance to work on those guidelines and I'm really happy that they exist. I don't think it matters where you are

but having figured out how to talk granting to funders [and] to granting agencies helps with that kind of education and with being noticed and with helping senior colleagues and administrators understand that kind of thing.

I feel really weird talking about senior colleagues cause I'm old at this point. Now I'm senior so, you know, do with that what you will.

Chambliss: Well, having done all the work, what do you see as the future for TEI? Where it's going?

Tomasek: It's been around for 30 years. It's going to be around for another 30. One of my colleagues on the board really wants us to figure out how TEI fits with the graph model of the web, which means integrating TEI with this thing called RDF, which stands for *resource definition framework*. You don't have time to talk about that today, but I think the thing about the TEI is that it's evolved. When the TEI started, there was no XNL. We had the precursor of both HTML and XML, which was this thing called SGML, which I can't remember what that stands for. So, there were people from the TEI who were on the working group that came up with XML. So, I always like it when my colleagues say, "Oh yeah, and the TEI contributed to the technology we use today for storing the information in our word processing and XL files," and all that kind of stuff, right? So, I think the TEI is gonna be around and I think it's gonna continue to evolve as the technology evolves, and I think that's really exciting. I think one thing that's going on at this point is that we're well into the third generation of

technical experts and scholars who are involved with the TEI. And I think that's really very exciting. I think that's going to continue to be there. I and my friends make a lot of jokes about [me] being one of the very few historians who use the TEI because literature and linguistics are places where the TEI came from.

But documentary editing is [a] place within the field of history that is actually very close to the kind of scholarly editing. That is the place where the TEI came from. And that includes things like the papers of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and names [of] all the presidents. But it also includes the papers of Martin Luther King Jr., and documentary editing is actually much, much bigger... And I think that...as we continue to observe what digital technologies can help us do as we think historically—as we continue to think about what it means that, with a bookkeeping ontology, I can do a transcription. I mean, I can do a digital edition of this rural New England businessman's books and it can talk to, it can be in relation to, the books from a store on a North Carolina plantation. It can be in conversation with the accounts kept by George Washington. It can be in conversation with accounts that were kept in 15th century Florence. I think there are ways that digital tools and the digital environment can continue to change the kinds of questions we ask and the things we do when we do history.

Chambliss: Well, I think that's a great place to end it because that really points away to great things to come. I really

appreciate you taking the time to talk to me about your work. And if people want to find you on the web, where would they go?

Tomasek: So, mostly I'm really active on Twitter, which is probably not a good thing to say. I'm @KathrynTomasek. I also actually respond to email.

Chambliss: Well, thank you, and thanks for taking the time to talk to me for *Reframing History*.

PART II
IDENTITY AND DIGITAL HUMANITIES

One of the core challenges to digital humanities has grown from the recognition of how digital canonical narrative all too easily replicates patterns of exclusion in the print canon. This has given rise to an impressive set of digital humanities projects that embrace postcolonial, feminist, and critical race theoretical frameworks. In section, the experiences of [Maryemma Graham](#), [Hilary Green](#), [Dhanashree Thorat](#), and [Roopika Risam](#) highlight the transformative nature of this digital scholarship and how our understanding of identity, community, and power is reshaped by digital praxis.

MARYEMMA GRAHAM AND THE BLACK IMAGINATION

5

"It was really a massive undertaking, but I thought I would just focus on fiction because of the growth of fiction. So the project on the history of black writing was kind of born..."

Maryemma Graham

I first met Dr. Maryemma Graham during a digital humanities presentation I gave at the Zora Neale Hurston Festival. Learning about the History of Black Writing Project at the University of Kansas, I was intrigued because Graham and her project have been quietly doing their work for decades. Graham is a University Distinguished Professor in the Department of English at the University of Kansas. The author of 10 books and numerous articles, Dr. Graham is an accomplished scholar who turned to using digital methods before we fully embraced the narrative of Digital Humanities we have today. In 1983, she founded the Project on the History

of Black Writing (HBW). HBW seeks to recover literary works in Black Studies, promote innovative scholarship linked to book history and digital humanities, professional and curriculum development, and public literacy. The project started at the University of Mississippi in 1983 and moved to the University of Kansas in 1999. In our conversation, she recounts the origins of this project and the potential impact on our understanding of the black literary legacy in the United States.

Keywords

Frank Yerby, Zora Neale Hurston, African-American Literature, African-American Materials Project, Black Women Writers, African-American Novels Project (AANP), Black Periodical Fiction Project

The Conversation

Chambliss: Thank you for joining me, Dr. Graham.

Graham: Thank you for the invitation.

Chambliss: So, for those of you who are joining us for this episode of *Reframing History*. I'm here with Dr. Maryemma Graham, who is a distinguished professor at the University of Kansas in the Department of English. And I'm really happy to talk with her in part because I'm really—for this season of *Reframing History*—really intrigued with the great variety of these humanities projects happening out there in the world

and recognize that there are so many things happening that are slipping through the cracks, at least my own cracks. In fact, I had this whole conversation with a colleague recently about the rich variety of projects that are happening. Dr. Graham's project is a prime example of this. [It's] a really important project and I'm really happy that you have the time to talk to me about it today. And the project I'm talking about here is the History of Black Writing, which is a digital humanities project that's actually been going on for, I'm not exaggerating here, decades.

Graham: Yeah, 35 years and pushing.

Chambliss: 35 years and pushing.

Graham: Not giving you my age, yes.

Chambliss: Right, yeah. I'm sure you started when you were 12.

Graham: Absolutely.

Chambliss: And you're an accomplished scholar, author of several books and articles including *The Cambridge History of African-American Literature* and *The Cambridge Companion to the African-American Novel*. You've done great work on Margaret Walker, but you've been the founder and director of this project for the entirety of its 35 years. So, how did you come to this project? How did this sort of emerge as a field of study for you because I assume when you started, what we call DH was not as defined as it is now?

Graham: That is true. And our early name actually indicates the birth of the project. It was a really clunky name:

The Computer-Assisted Analysis of Black Literature, or CABL. We were trying to go for an acronym. But again, in those pre-digital days, we just knew that technology's important and technology and race is even more important. So, what do you do if you apply some of those new tools? Even though I didn't start at 12, the fact is I did start when I was in graduate school because I was raising questions and the experience I had was doing research at the Schomburg in New York when Ernest Kaiser was still alive. . . . If there's anything we can see as living digitally, it was certainly Ernest Kaiser, who knew everything about everything [and] every book with his own taxonomy. Just fascinating. When I went in to look for some stuff, they hadn't processed what I wanted from the 1930s, so I was basically sitting on the floor going through boxes at his instruction to try to get what I needed. I was sitting there very frustrated, thinking, "Wouldn't it be great if this information I wanted [and that] other people might want were available and accessible?"

And in a form that you wouldn't have to go from Cornell, which is where I was at the time, to New York on the weekends on the night bus to be there when the library opened in the morning and go through all this material, and take it down by hand. It was a very extensive, labor-intensive process. So, at that point, it was just thinking, "Okay, I'll do this work and then somebody else will come behind me," because I was looking at the 1930s, which is kind of a blanked-out period. Except for Richard Wright and a few writers, we didn't talk

about that period at all. I was really interested in who was writing and I discovered a lot of writers that nobody ever talked about. Some of those have come back alive in our Project on the History of Black Writing. The digital project that we, of course, have embraced is the Black Book Interactive Project or BBIP. So, almost everybody who's been associated with us since 2010 has been associated with BBIP in one way or another. It's our latest baby. It's now, what, nine years old? That is our birthing period.

But the project itself was really about that. It was very simple. Why can't we just consolidate information and make it more available? Yes, you can go to the library if you know what you're looking for. But what if you don't know what you're looking for [and] you just have a question? To answer that question, the idea of bibliographies, databases…I don't even think that term was in use at the time, the word "database." We actually decided to use the term "computerize the database" in the early days. We were just going to pull together a massive bibliography, put in on the computer, and therefore make it available by circulating it to people who were teaching Black literature. If you were choosing books to teach and you were focusing on periods, let us tell you more books that were published in particular periods, so you don't just focus on the top three or four. We actually did an early interview, or I should say a "survey" with people, asking what books they taught. We discovered that people used a very, very, very small number of books over and over again.

This is, of course, 1983. Hurston's work has just begun to re-circulate [and] re-enter the canon. But for the most part, lots and lots of writers were left out and I was aware of a couple of things that were going on. I guess I should step back and say I'm a child of the library. I don't know why I didn't become a librarian because I spent my childhood working in the library, living in the library, [and] staying in the library because that was where I was supposed to be when my parents picked me up after school. It was across the street from the school, so not to get in trouble, you go to the library.

I knew a lot about what was in the library. In the stage of the segregated libraries, I grew up in the south. We did have more books in our libraries, for instance, that existed in, say, the main library downtown. I would know about books written by people in my community. I'm from Augusta, Georgia, Frank Yerby's hometown, James Round's hometown. [They] didn't make it to other libraries because those writers were not as significant in terms of what their work meant.

Yerby, one of those writers who was "popular," [was] a historical romance writer for a long time before he became more canonical. I think there's work on him now, but for a long time, he was just a pot-boiler writer whose work actually was adapted to film early on. The early period was really just about collecting and recovering. Collecting work, recovering work. Now, I have to give credit to another outfit because this project started 1983, but early in the '70s, at North Carolina Central University, there was a project called the African-

American Materials Project. It was probably before you even were born. I mean, most people I work with now, this is way before them, right? But librarians were trying to get a handle on where Black authored books were. Now, everybody knows Fisk University. Everybody knew the Schomburg. People knew Meineke. But there were collections in institutions all over the country, particularly in the South, white and black, that nobody knew about. This project was aimed at bringing together or trying to gain, in library-speak, bibliographic control over Black authored material. They simply named it the African-American Materials Project.

You can imagine what happened. They had federal funding, I think it was from the Office of Education. This is before some of the other agencies became involved and they couldn't finish the project. They got very far, and I was the fortunate beneficiary of their reports to the federal government. Now, I don't know if I'm revealing confidential information or not here, but they had...the manuals they compiled and spiral-bound books of all the books in various libraries. They created their own code or taxonomy for what was what, and I got that. I saw that they had started a project that really needed to be finished in terms of African-American materials. But I also did more research and found that, by 1970, we had about a 600% increase in Black fiction writing. About a 600% increase.

Chambliss: So is that in the sense of actual writers being—

Graham: Actual writers publishing. Now, you know what happened. To put this reference here, [in] 1970, who publishes

their first books? Tony K. Bambara, *The Black Woman*. Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*. Alice Walker, *Meridian*. I mean, the list goes on. 1970 was a banner year, particularly for Black women writers. But lots of writing occurred, and I knew at that point I didn't have the power [or] capacity that the African-American Materials Project had because they really were training librarians alongside building this project. It was really a massive undertaking, but I thought I would just focus on fiction because of the growth of fiction. The project on the History of Black Writing was kind of born because that wasn't our original name. When we had to go for funding, we needed a simpler name that would identify ourselves, and we became the African-American Novel Project, AANP. That was where our first grant [came in]...it was really a pre-digital grant because we were consolidating bibliographies. We were just building a computerized database with NEH funding.

Chambliss: Right, so this is one of the things that's really interesting. As I was doing research, I found your timeline for your project and, of course, it covers a tremendous amount of funding and a tremendous amount of evolution of the project. Your project's unique I think, in part because it kind of comes before our contemporary definitional conversations about digital humanities, so it makes for a really interesting question because I always ask people this question: How do you define Digital Humanities? And you're really in a unique place to answer this question because you started before the current landscape of digital humanities. How has [the] transformation

that's happened in the last decade or so matter in the narrative of the life of this multi-decade project for you?

Graham: The convergence, of course, occurs with several things [like] the Black Periodical Fiction Project that Henry Louis Gates was involved in around the same time. A lot of projects converged, but what was fundamentally different I think, for us, was that we wanted to put our hands on every book we had in our computerized database. We wanted to say, "We need to see this book, we need to verify." Because part of the method we developed was what we call a "verification procedure." We discovered bibliographies were filled with errors in terms of who the authors of certain books were. White authors were included and we could even find the source of errors. We could see where the first error was made and all the people [who] subsequently published the error.

If we're going to do this, we've got to do it right. We had a method. We were thinking methodologically from the very beginning. How do we do this? We collected books. We did inter-library loan. We found collections. You would hear about a house or a sale or a home. We would tell people, "If you see any books, don't throw them away. Call us."

It was really as simple as that, and we found books in attics. We recovered books. We had people driving us books and saying, "I hear you all looking for Black books. This is my grandfather's, blah blah blah." We were in the process of recovering and collecting...it's what Kim Gallon talks about. Fundamentally, it's recovery work we're doing. It's where we

were in the very beginning, recovering a history, an unknown history, an unwritten history. So that meant that, for the first three, four, or five years with that NEH funding, we were just collecting all the books. But we also said, "Okay, this is an inter-library loan. We can't keep these books. We don't own them. What are we going to do?" We scanned them. We photocopied them. We didn't use the word scan. We photocopied every book. We had a grant from the federal government that gave us high school students for the summer and they were the best staff people we really ever had because they were at college.

At 15 and 16, they were on a college campus, the University of Mississippi. Their parents were proud to have them associated with the summer program and they helped us [to] what we would say today, "digitize," except they didn't make them OCR, machine-readable. [We] photocopied 1,200 or more books and we still have those physical and photocopies of those books. The transition came to, "Okay let's digitize these books," which means "let's make them machine-readable so we can do the text mining and the research on the text in this database." The problem is that we were ahead at one point and then we fell behind because the technology moved ahead so rapidly. So, you're right. DH entered in, and here we are still with this collection of texts, mostly unknown. These are not the famous writers. They are the most unknown texts that we have sitting in our offices that moved from Mississippi to Boston and ultimately to Kansas 20 years ago. We came to Kansas with these boxes and they were in file cabinets. We

literally had the Allied Van Lines [go] across the country with books.

Now, clearly that was a very manual labor-intensive process. [We] couldn't go on like that because the more books we got, we started getting physical copies because people knew who we were and they would send us novels. First published novels [and] first editions because they know we would need to have it and we would talk about their work. Nobody else would talk about it. We would do reviews of the book. We would do collections. We served a purpose for about 10 years that really was collecting and recovering at that level. The second stage for us was, okay, we know about these books but nobody else does. We just have the photocopies. We started developing our professional development programs. That's where a lot of the funding came in. NEH has funded about 14 of our teaching summer institutes and we use these books. We introduce books to teachers and younger scholars, and we want people to know that they exist or to be curious enough to ask more questions when they are developing their curriculum.

Chambliss: Yeah, this is really one of the things that's really impressive about the program, and I think about some of the programs that have emerged to a popular consciousness in the last few years like the Color Conventions Project, for instance. You've done a lot of the same stuff. You just did it in a less-digital way. I don't mean that in a bad way. In the sense that...you've got a number of students, a number of professionalization programs. You have these summer

seminars. You had a publication that was spun out of these works. I noted that you had this relationship with the Cambridge University Press where you put out collections. A lot of work, on some level, [was] creating a canon of these unknown Black writers, making them known.

Graham: Yeah, well that was the purpose of the project, like I said. We knew, but we had to share this information. Now, before social media, you had to do this at conferences. You had to do it in teaching contexts, and we would try to get as broad as possible. The summer institutes meant that we were sharing with people around the country. And because I'm the product of an HBCU—I graduated from Chapel Hill but I did my early career and my family is centered in those institutions—I felt that, whenever we did those institutes, we made sure they were inclusive from the very beginning. We would include people from community colleges, HBCUs, and PWIs. We made sure there were a large number of people who are going to go out and take this information. I think that that's probably what people most know about our work. That is, they are in these institutes. They can see the projects on their own and they go out and publish, and they attribute the kind of questions they began to ask to the work they were doing in one of our 12 or 14 summer institutes.

People would come as graduate students. We argued with NEH years ago that you've got to bring graduate students into these summer institutes. Back in those days, it was only for faculty. I can say now, publicly, I broke the law sometimes

and I brought in graduate students even though they were not supposed to be technically funding participants. That was the best law that I broke because had it not been for those graduate students who were already advanced and also much more, who were born digital, they brought to the project the missing component. So, you probably know more of our sort of products. I should say, Ken Ramsey is one of them who does all kinds of work. These are people who came to KU in this particular period, the 20-year period, took the nail by the head, and said, "Okay, we really want to do this kind of work. What can we do?" And they brought a lot to the process. Our digital component started around 2010 or so, and then we called it our Digital Project Initiative, the DPI, and later on that evolved into the Black Book Interactive Project, which is really our digital component today.

Chambliss: Right. And one of the things that I think will be really interesting for people who know DH is that your database, it's basically something that a scholar [can] come to and pursue any number of different kinds of research questions, right? If they have a question, you have a dataset, basically.

Graham: And the basis is to really make this very simple because it can be very complicated, and I think there's an intention to make something so complicated, like poetry. Make it so complicated nobody can understand it and make criticism of something that has to be trained or taught. But we wanted to be able to say, "You can come to our database." We

have a database. If you know novels out there that we don't have… And that is exactly what is happening right now as I speak; our latest, most recently funded program for BBIP is a scholar's program. The Black Book Interactive Project is a database. The interface is done by our partnership with the University of Chicago. It's a philological interface. It has our HBW corpus in it, all of our novels. We send the novels to them. They do the digitizing and, therefore, that interface is what people can access. People come up with different projects. We've got people who are interested in looking at how Afro-futurism predates the term itself. So, how do we the, do text-mining—whether it's through word searches or phrase searches or looking at setting or looking at the use of the word "history"? We can pull text and point us in the direction of questions that we could ask of those texts.

It's simple in the sense of doing the kind of searching through our database. You're right. Once you get the text you need, it leads you to other stuff. You don't start with a predetermined set of books. We're saying, "We've got the whole database you can search, but let's find a shared language or a common vocabulary…but it might, in fact, appear in some of these books." We looked for all the terms and we generate lists. You can then take that list and develop a research schema to work with. That's what the scholars right now are doing—they are helping us expand the database, first of all, because we have the same numbers of books we started with. We've digitized all of them. We have created a metadata

scheme, which is one of our grant projects. We argued that the current schema people are using did not pay attention to factors of race and racialization. We came up with a schema that did that; we created our own.

Every book that enters into our database will be described in a particular way that pays particular attention to race over time. People develop projects once they see how many books were concerned with X, Y, or Z, mostly books we don't even know or can talk about. That's kind of the way it works. People come to the database. Right now, the BBIP scholars are funded to do that. They are part of a nine, 10-month program through webinars and on-site meetings. They come to do the work. We learn how to do it together and they practice. We supply support staff for them, and they do their research. There are varied stages of research and various kinds of projects.

Chambliss: How does a scholar get on that track? Is there an open call?

Graham: We have a website. We have people communicate with us directly. BBIP has its own website and people can communicate, reach out that way. We have our offices, the University of Kansas. We thought the BBIP Scholars Program would be the best way to do it because then we have 14, 15 people around the country who are doing things with the database, and they can therefore invite other people. They would spread the word.

Basically, we're sort of using the "each one, teach one" model. We've got 15 people, different institutions. We

encourage people to do work together. There are teams in many of the projects. That is, two people from an institution or someone working with a similar institution nearby and them [all] working on projects together. The projects vary. Some people want to know how the idea of a diaspora operates in Black fiction, [so] you ask questions that'll relate to that. Some people want to know the specificity of certain themes ([like] how do we look at the thematic ideas?) because that is one way of looking at literature, thematically.

One real project right now is Dr. Trudy Harris doing a new book on the theme of home in Black literature. She wanted us to see how home figures in our database. We were pulling all the texts and we looked at the way "home" is used [and] all those words that stand for home. We always do that. Now, of course, she'd be writing 20 volumes if she were to do a study on every book that we had. We don't know how many books we have but we do have a lot of books, so she can at least set up something and, in our view, she can set up something for other students to come behind her and do the additional work because they see the beginning of something very new. I think the strength we feel we have is that we put something out there. We get you started and we let you see what you can create and generate on your own, and then you start your own pod. That's what we're doing.

Chambliss: This seems like a really powerful model, the teaching model to get the information out there. You've been,

I think, extremely successful in maintaining the integrity of the project. What do you see as your biggest challenge?

Graham: Very good question because, as DH becomes its own—I hate to use the word "animal" or "monster"—it is now such a big thing in the field. The interesting thing about it is the very notion of the digital humanities seems to have taken off without serious thought to the term "humanities" or "human" [or] "being human." [What] we're saying is that we put the humanities back into the work that's being done. We're saying, "Here are all these human beings whose work exists that has been excluded from the vast majority of the work that we've done." When people like Kim Gallon argue that recovery is a central element, that is true. We still are recovering work. We're naming the unnamed. We're bringing things to the surface and we are trying to understand what those traditions tell us that we don't know. And how can we say we know what the history of the human experience is without that? This is a powerful tool and process but also a questioning of whether a field like the Digital Humanities can really exist without the kind of work that we're doing that's Black studies related.

Chambliss: I think that's really interesting. I don't know that a lot of people understand some of the complexities around DH that's sort of inflected by Black studies. You mentioned Kim Gallon, who wrote a really seminal essay about Black DH. I think for some people doing DH, there is a great, great emphasis—a sort of spinning out of the post-

colonial DH conversations a few years ago—that these spaces, the Digital Humanities, are basically replicating the same kind of omissions that happened in the original space, the physical spaces. A lot of Black DH work, I count myself among this, is about recovery. About recovery, about discovery, right? You're trying to bring these things [that] are hidden to public light and you use digital humanities techiques to do it.

But one of the things that's interesting about your project is that it sort of straddles this divide, because [it's] basic level recovery work but also really strong interpretive work, right? You have a dataset and the creation of that dataset in itself is its own sort of interpretive project. You have to create the taxonomy, you have to create the metadata. You create the ways of knowing, basically. And the tools, right? Once you have a dataset, there are a number of tools you can bring to it depending on your training and your background.

Graham: Well, the text-mining part of it, if you go the reverse engineering route, you've got to think about "Okay, what do I want to know at the end of the process?" I think the difficulty...[is] that there is a deep learning curve in DH for people; so I would argue that, if you think about it as something foreign to you and not something that might in fact be more central to Black culture generally...that is, the use of technology is something that is not at all foreign to Black people.

We can create out of anything. If you're looking at MCs, if you look at any of the work we do that comes through hip-hop,

there [is] technology, [like] Adam Banks' book, *Digital Griots*. Those kind of ideas of technology are not foreign to us. We kind of demystified what DH is. Race and technology coming together. Race and technology. Now, that's a big sweep here. You get a corner of that. Which piece are you doing?

I would say what we're trying to do is create a model. I'm doing fiction. Who's doing poetry? Who's doing theater and drama? Who's doing any kind of work that has some kind of generic base to it? Who's doing the work? You can create a dataset or art. Visual stuff. You can create a dataset with all of it because the technology does exist and the dataset simply allows you to study, to mine it. That's not complicated.

Chambliss: Right, so is that, at some level, the next stage for you? Is it a question of, "Okay, we, at some level, have the history of Black writing [down]? Now we need to start thinking about non-fiction or poetry." Or is that your next developmental stage?

Graham: Yeah, and I think [it's] because we always felt like we needed to train as we go. That is, as we move [through] these different stages, we want everybody to be on the same page, too, as many people as possible. And it's intergenerational. I want to be the first to admit that my level of skill with our project is far inferior to those of my students because they are born digital. They have an immediate kind of response and an intuitiveness about it that I struggle to achieve. But we're working together, so this is always

collaborative work. It takes teams of people. I mean, we've got teams of people.

That's something that people have to get over too: the lone scholar doing work. All of us get credit. All of us are doing this work together. We're doing different pieces of it. We have specializations that we bring together, and we're also crossing the disciplinary boundaries. We're working with librarians. We're working with staff people. In the very beginning, as I said, we weren't doing computers, but I did my work primarily with the computer engineering staff at the University of Mississippi because nobody knew what I was doing. I'm not sure I knew what I was doing, but I knew there was a better way to bring information together and to organize it and make it accessible. That was just a principle. But right now, it is training people who can take this project and run with it and adopt the model to whatever they're interested in.

But you're right, it starts with the dataset. You've got to build the dataset. It can be small, it can be large. We felt like we could be the master dataset for African-African fiction, the novel in particular. That's what we started with, [what] we're still with. . . . It'll never be complete. It will live long past me. I know this. Or you, for that matter. But we're talking about succession. We have to talk about that. Who will keep adding to the state of this? Right now, it's the only one out there like this. It's the only one.

Chambliss: Right, yeah. I was struck by that. If you think

about it...you can't find it anywhere else. Not even the Library of Congress.

Graham: No, you can't. We know where stuff is, which is one of the first things we did. There's a consolidation of where stuff exists, but we thought it also needed to be available to people. . . . And that's why I'm saying, when you come to this project, my view is that you also become part of it, and you own it. I may have founded it in 1983, but the people who work with us also own this project. Many of them bring titles that are added to the database. People have work invested in here, it belongs to them as much as it belongs to me. In that sense, it's a public space. You could look at this idea of DH as being a public space where people can enter and have certain kinds of conversations that are not being held anywhere else. I think that our ownership over this, in a sense, is probably much more powerful than we realize, way beyond the debates that other people are having. I was asked for a quote for a newspaper article recently, and it was saying, "There's a lot of controversy over DH, about what it doesn't do, blah blah blah." I said, "My question is what has it not done?"

We know what it has not done because the exclusionary practices, as you say, have continued and there's a hierarchy in the digital humanities arena... If you just [look at] Amy Earhardt's term, "DIY," the do-it-yourself project, we are an original do-it-yourself project, right? But do-it-yourself-ers don't get very far. They drop off the radar. The URL disappears.

Chambliss: Right, yeah. There's no infrastructure.

Graham: Right, so what do you do? Then, if you talk about Black collections at HBCUs—under-resourced, under-funded, closing by the day—then what's going on? We have a lot of work to do in terms of making sure that things come into the digital domain so that they can be preserved. It's also cultural preservation. It's that as well. Recovery is one thing, discovery is one thing, but preservation is another. There are technical questions we have to ask, [like] why we need the people who talk about what technologies are going to remain, which is going to be fleeting. What are we doing? Is it going to be available in the next 10 years? We have those kinds of critical questions, but the bigger questions are really the exclusionary practices that continue and the hierarchy—and hierarchies drive funding.

Chambliss: Right.

Graham: I know I'm fairly lucky because I've been pushing that door as much as I could, but I don't get nowhere near the kind of funding that's available for DH. I mean, a lot of money has been going into this arena. I'm saying we are doing some of that. I think we're doing the groundwork. We're doing the groundwork that's pushing the field itself to be more humane and human, to live up to your reputation. It's not just quantifying. Now, I can also say that there is a question of how technology has disadvantaged Black people. We know this is also the case. You may not remember the cliometrics, do you remember that era?

Chambliss: I do remember that. Yeah.

Graham: That did not serve to our advantage.

Chambliss: That was not helpful, yeah.

Graham: That's why cliometricians were arguing, "Well actually, the number's not as big as we thought, whatever, whatever."

Chambliss: Yeah, "The numbers say the calories for a slave were…"

Graham: That's right!

Chambliss: Yeah.

Graham: You do have times when you have to question what that was about and part of that is who's at the table when these decisions are being made. I think that's the argument for a lot of people in DH. When you're talking about these projects and shaping and defining [them]…the knowledge production and creation that you're doing, who's at the table? Who's part of the conversation? If you're not part of the conversation, you very likely will be left out.

Chambliss: Yeah, what are the questions that are being formulated at that table also are really important.

Graham: Right, and so you change the nature of the questions. You change the spaces [in] which the questions are being asked and you force to table questions that people would prefer to keep hidden.

Chambliss: Right, and answers become different too, right? Answers are not the same if—

Graham: Yeah, alternative notions of the human. All of

this comes to the table when we sit there and babble out hard questions that have always been central to the humanities, in my view. I think it's correctly named. That is, "Digital Humanities," but it hasn't lived up to the human part. It's lived up to the digital part, but the human part is a little lacking.

Chambliss: So, that's a good place to come to an end because that's the classic question of DH. I know that you guys have a great website, so if we want to find you online, it's *hbw.ku.edu.*

Graham: That's right.

Chambliss: If people want to reach out to you, can they meet you through your website?

Graham: Yes, you can. And you can reach us through that website or mgraham@ku.edu and I can redirect you because one of the advantages of the BBIP team that's working on this—that is, the staff right now—is that we have a team of advisors who literally help people do the work they want to do. Right now, with our first class of BBIP scholars, our hope is that we will secure additional funding to have ongoing classes of BBIP scholars. More scholars are coming in to do more work, and to be able to expand the database but also develop their own models across the board...

Chambliss: The CLA journal's also where some of the publications for the some of the scholars are.

Graham: Actually, the only dedicated journal or special issue to DH was done by CLA, and the editor was Howard

Ramsey. That's the only one that I've seen that's been focused on what we would call Black DH. We might be running behind, but I think we have the structure to really build and make a major contribution. I hope people see this as not something that is too foreign, too strange, too unusual, but [as] something they probably are already ready to do without realizing it.

Chambliss: Well yeah, I think one of the things about this project is that now, as people learn more about it [and] the opportunity to come work with your dataset, it's a tremendous opportunity because you have the questions. Making the dataset is often one of the hardest things about DH work.

Graham: It's labor intensive but I think we can also help people formulate questions. If you just sort of say, "I'm curious about blah blah blah," we can help you refine [the] questions that would allow you to get what you need from the corpus when you go and insert some words and phrases into the interface. The philologic interface it's called. Then, you generate text that will help you. Now, it's not an excuse. We're having to do hard work now. Let me make sure that's clear to—

Chambliss: No, no, but I think for people who are interested in DH, [they] understand you have a ready-made corpus here with a taxonomy and there's a way you can shake some research questions and start pulling out some results. That really opens the door to a lot of different things. There

[are] a couple ideas I'll probably want to contact you [about] myself.

Graham: We're here.

Chambliss: But I always try to keep these things under an hour. I really appreciate you taking the time to tell us about this great project. I really do appreciate that.

Graham: Thank you for the invitation, as I said. I'm looking forward to meeting more people and hopefully asking more questions collectively that can push this field forward to our advantage.

Chambliss: Yeah, I think there's going to be a lot more attention given to the kind of questions you're talking about. I do not think you're alone in these questions but you're at a very particular place because your dataset allows you to really facilitate a set of conversations. Hopefully people will follow up and learn more about your project. Of course, we'll put links in the show notes and let people know.

HILARY GREEN AND TRANSFORMATIVE DIGITAL HISTORY

6

"...I tell people sometimes you start off by yourself or you don't know and you make mistakes along the way, but you keep thinking. What is that grounding point? For me it's that student who said slavery did not exist at the university."

Hilary Green

Dr. Hilary Green is an Associate Professor of History in the Department of Gender and Race Studies at the University of Alabama. Her research and teaching interests explore the intersections of race, class, and gender in African-American history. Her first book, *Educational Reconstruction: African American Schools in the Urban South, 1865-1890* (Fordham University Press, 2016), explored how African Americans and their white allies created, developed, and sustained a system of African American schools during the transition from slavery to freedom. Green has captured attention for her Digital Humanities project, **Hallowed Ground**. She began this

project in the Spring of 2015. While she has described it as her "side project," it has grown into a unique example of a digital humanities project that engages students and the public around questions of race and memory. It is also a startling example of how a scholar working alone can build an engaging and transformative digital experience. Green has led thousands of walking tours highlighting the impact of slave labor in creating the University of Alabama and linked that to an impressive digital humanities database of records, maps, and other sources.

Keywords

Slavery, Education History, University of Alabama, Black Digital Humanities, Critical Race Studies

The Conversation

Chambliss: So, the first question I ask everybody is: how do you define Digital Humanities?

Green: Oh, this is a good question. So, for me,...I'm a humanist by training, so I'm concerned about highlighting the human and their experiences. So, for me, digital humanities helps to explain the human using digital tools in very creative and innovative ways that traditional humanists, like myself, who rely on the archives, can't do. So, instead, how can I get spatial analysis? How can I do different types of things, but also photography, and expand? And what is the archives? What

is the human experience without relying on just traditional texts and traditional sources and physical archives?

Chambliss: Okay. That's a really interesting answer in part because you put a lot of emphasis on the human, which I think is one of those tension points to doing humanities. I want to follow up that question by asking you specifically about the project that brought you to MSU, Hallowed Grounds, which I really see is sort of at the intersection of pedagogy and digital humanities practice and research. I'm also really inspired and [it] really resonates with me, your origin story for the project because I have a similar kind of origin story. Can you talk a little bit about that project and the context?

Green: Yeah. For me, my project Hallowed Grounds started off with a student question and a comment that slavery did not exist at the University of Alabama. And it made me think about the myths, the narratives, and the power of that. The student who walked on a campus that was built by enslaved people as a legacy of that history could not see and recognize that legacy and the university and universities like [the] University of Alabama (UA) have been part of this myth telling [them] to not tell their past. And what happens is the people they were highlighting were the ones who enslaved and [were] the big men of society, instead of the everyday folks who were viewed as moveable property, who worked at the university, [were] children born at the university, people [who] died at the university. And these people [walked] the same land.

Digital Humanities and looking at this work allowed me to talk about race, the institution of slavery, the lives of the enslaved, and those who were hidden in plain sight [on] the same grounds I'm walking [now]. That student walked every day and changed [the] narrative of that long history of African Americans there. For me, I brought back the enslaved people to the narrative that were being excluded. And with this digital humanities project, starting with a movable walking tour and trying to get people to walk the campus and not just read about it—to then have documents or fill up a bibliography [with] images of reconstruction and the postwar line, you can follow the whole person from life to death. And then, also [as] to the life and death of slavery, but also [as to] their actual life and what they contributed. And so [I'm] de-centering the narrative of enslavers and the institutions and focusing on the people who are not being talked about.

Chambliss: Right. One of the things that's really interesting about your project is your ability to bridge this sort of virtual world and the real world, right? [Like the] public history element of the project. And I'm struck by the fact that your project is really inflected by some of the literature around Digital Humanities and Black studies people like Kim Gallon and Jessica Marie Johnson, which is a really important part of this whole ideological framework that sort of distinguishes, I think, some of the post-colonial elements of Digital Humanities versus what people might think of. And I know that's something that, when you talk about the project, when

you gave your presentation and as you talked about the literature, really shaped that narrative. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Green: Yeah, I'm a self-taught DH person and, for me, like any scholar, I always read. Like, what's the practice? Other than using digital humanities projects, what are some of the projects and the literature [that] helped inform the decisions that connect what I traditionally do [as] a social historian [around] the experiences of African Americans before 1920. But three articles really convinced me, and I was like, "This is my 'aha!' moment." The first one was Tara McPherson's about DH being so white because the DH projects I was using and having my students use in class couldn't answer the questions about the everyday African American experience and Black women's experience. [They] focused on great white men and the enslavers, [so] it wasn't possible to ask the questions they wanted to answer. And so, for me, by having Tara McPherson as my first entree into that piece in Digital Humanities…which I learned it at that camp through the AHA, so really it became a crash course in digital humanities practice.

She (McPherson) said to be intentional; bring that critical feminist and critical race theory into the practice and build and get out of your comfort zone. And I just took them like, "I will get out of my comfort zone. I will do this, and if I'm going to do this project, I will build it alongside doing the research and not be selfish and just maintain it as an article without showing the process behind the scene, the transcription and

the sources." Then, I looked at Moya Bailey's work about DH being white, STEM, and gender. But also, some of us must be brave, and [embrace] that idea [that] we need to go outside the disciplinary issues and the tools and the gender dynamics tied to a lot of coding and things like that.

And then Jessica Marie Johnson as well as other scholars of slavery and what they have been able to do and using the traces of people and making them into full people. And to recognize and use my own literature like, "Oh, this is possible!" But I can also incorporate and make this richer and understand what I'm seeing in that UA. It's the Black Digital Humanities work [of] those who are called for ethics and how to use and view people and historical subjects. But [it] also [speaks] to this intentionality and being creative but rigorous that [has] really drawn [me]. And so, they bring that in. That has always been how I intentionally have built this site, with that always in mind and wanting to contribute to that rather than [to] a project. I didn't take those concerns [to] heart from the beginning.

Chambliss: Right. And I think that's one of the things that's really interesting about your project because I think, a lot of the time, when we talked about Digital Humanities we often think about it as a team of people. And [for] a lot of the Digital Humanities, that is the story in the public sphere (a team of people). But the reality is a lot of scholars doing digital are doing [it] alone, and they often have a very similar pathway in terms of "I have a project or an intellectual idea." And they

start using digital tools and eventually someone says, "You're a digital humanities person," which is exactly what happened to me, right? Like, if you would have asked me in 2007, "are you a digital humanities person," I would've said, "I don't know what you mean, I'm doing an oral history project but I'm not doing digital humanities work." But, after a certain point, the label sort of sits with you.

Green: Yes. Yeah.

Chambliss: I really admire the vibe that you [say]—I say this too—"I don't code."

Green: Right.

Chambliss: This brings [up] one of the hidden issues of the humanities that I think it's really important for us to bring to light, which is the hidden labor of creating a project and the fact that a lot of people are doing projects alone. What has been your experience of being [the] sort of lone DH practitioner at an institution? . . . You're talking about the history of slavery and the University of Alabama, which can be a quite emotionally charged thing. Talk a little bit about that. What does it mean to be a digital humanities practitioner without a team?

Green: Yeah, for me, one of the biggest challenges—and why I operate this project alone—really was the early skeptics of the project. My research initially [was] this idea of like, "Oh, we've written about this person, we know about Manley's diaries that are digitized through the university and its digital collections," but it's not tagged and it's not transcribed. And

we have these diaries that had been used because they're digital but not accessible. [That and] early skeptics were like, "We already know about slavery. We don't need to know anymore." And for me, I had to say "We don't know a lot. I will dig it, start building. So what?" And over time, as I was building and communicating now, I was also realizing the labor because I would do this project when I had a spare hour or two that I could go to the archives and build my databases.

When I get a spare hour to go to the archives or [had] the time on everything else. The labor, it became a labor of love that was not my traditional work. And then, in terms of resources I had to overcome, how do I go beyond what has been digitized and [what] people know to have in the archives? And [how can the] archivists give me access and help me find the other sources that were there? So, I've been building relationships with folks in the archives, in the museums, in other institutions where I knew...had that work. But it wasn't till a year and a half into doing this hidden labor and slow labor of time—plus writing a book, plus doing everything else in the process [like] going for tenure—that I was able to convince others that slavery existed and [that] more people [were] wanting to know more. But the institution [was] not willing to pay to have students and pay to expand the team.

[There were] also the ethical concerns of doing that. [That] was when I was offered, like, "Oh, we can have students doing the tours and doing this labor, but they won't be paid," and be like, "I'm sorry, we're talking about slavery and we're talking

about exploitation of African American people, and we're talking about the legacy. They had to be paid." For me, as a paid employee of the university, I'm like, "As long as I'm getting paid and doing this work and getting recognized on the service side, I'm okay, but we can't expand without this." So, one of the limitations was funding and [the] ethical practices of building a project with people who are volunteers versus paid laborers, and then also the limitations of not having some digital tools that are common to everyone else, like Omeka and other things, so using the technological side to help build it. But, over time, using the website that UA provides for faculty as the early pilot site for the Hallowed Grounds information and building that way. For me, it's slow, it's scalable, but also, too, it's been over for, let's see, I started this in 2015 around February. It's a lot of labor that went in. So, now it looks like it's seamless, but it's still that extra labor and getting people through my classes to build content—. [Like], network building, doing that labor, and realizing if I don't increase my stakeholders it will be a one-person team.

But I'm at the point now where it can become a team because I built the legitimacy of it at my institution. For me, that groundwork, that labor, is paying off now. I tell people, "Sometimes you start off by yourself or you don't know and you make mistakes along the way, but you can still [do it] if you keep on thinking, 'what is that grounding point?'" And for me it's that student who said slavery did not exist at the university. And then also the names of the people who I have recovered.

But for me, it's whenever I have a spare moment, I'm doing more on top of everything else. And that hidden labor, I think one of the things with digital humanists, we need to recognize what's being done.

Chambliss: Right. So, you know, that's one of the things that your profile reflects that's very common. You got tenure, but not on a digital project. You were doing that parallel to your book project. I think a lot more people know about Hallowed Grounds than about your book project on African American education because it's digital and you know exactly how many people visit the site. You got statistics, and I point this out to people on my own work. I do comics research, but when I do podcasts, I know exactly how many people listen. In the academic world we still struggle with how to discern the impact of the digital narrative.

Green: Yeah. I know for me why I find [certain things] striking. I keep those statistics and I track them, and I started to put it in my faculty activity report. So, I do screenshots and I do the reporting based on the website. One of the most common documents on my website through Hallowed Ground has nothing to do with UA. It has everything to do with my Alma mater, UNC chapel Hill, and its connections to UA in terms of teaching. I had the dedication speech of Julian Carr for Silence Sam in 1913, and in that speech, he boasts about horsewhip a "negro wench." People have come to my website for that document and then they go, "Okay, this is at UNC, but what's going on at UA?" And then they're looking

from the UNC document and the University of Virginia documents to the UA documents and having conversations and teach-ins.

When Silent Sam was taken down in August of 2018, I had 60,000 unique visitors to my website. It was linked to all these media, international and national media. But it drove people to my website. Now, because of Hallow Grounds and having that project where I was aiming [for] about a thousand unique visitors a week, now I am getting (after that boost) about three the 5,000 a week and they're going from Carr's speech to the bill of sales for the enslaved people owned by the university to the legacy at the university. And I can track that movement but, at the same time, to get my university to recognize it, I started making reports on it. Like here's all the screenshots, here's all the statistics because impacts. It's hard to get that with books. It's hard to get that with articles. But with digital products, you can tell [what] your impact is and then justify worth and legitimacy elsewhere. It's because of that I'm able to expand.

Chambliss: Right, and because your institution says, "Oh, this is a project that brings us this kind of engagement."

Green: And it adds to their prestige and reputation as R1 school. This is where, for me, even though I talk about the human, it's that computation aspect and numbers that actually help us show this matters. And...one of the things is I also hear back from folks. Some of the most common users

to my website are homeschool parents, in particular African-American homeschool parents.

Chambliss: Right. Oh wow. Okay. Yeah, that makes a lot sense.

Green: And I also have other college campuses—largely in the South but also [in] the middle Atlantic—who are grappling with this history of campus slavery, linking back to UA and using it as a comparison point and then [figuring out] how to bring that history back to their campus and do similar projects. I'm actually learning and hearing, and [I'm] part of this DH community [across] other institutions because it's virtual and because it's online that I wasn't in before. My work on African American education after the Civil War, it's connected me to one set of networks...and it's the Hallowed Grounds project that I'm more known with K-12 teachers. It's this weird feedback loop, but I could actually measure content and impact better with the website in the Hallowed Grounds project than I can with other work.

Chambliss: And I know you've spoken about your desire to expand the project. One of the things we talked about [regarding] DH is how you institutionalize the project with awards and grants and things like that. It's not just that the institution starts to recognize you, it is also those pathways that support it. As you think about moving forward with Hallowed Grounds and how it sort of fits very neatly in that framework we spoke about before (Ed Ayers and digital scholarship), now you have all these things online. You generate all these

conversations. But you also generate other paths of inquiry for students to do projects, visualizations, or research projects, and they suggest ways to use the material. Like you show some really graceful, artistic things that you've done [and] suggested. When you think about a program moving forward the next two years [or] four years, what are some of the things you're envisioning for the project?

Green: One of the things I know for sure I want [is] to have a teaching resource center with possible lesson plans that are scalable based on grade content [and that] can be used for the source, because I want to make sure it's in the hands of teachers and homeschool parents who are using the site. The other thing I want to do, honestly, is unique visualization through augmented reality mapping and GIS mapping of migrations of some of the individuals who came to the university. [I also want to look at] the university's impact on not only the state, but the region, and after the Civil War with Reconstruction [and] Black communities—[like], trace that in a more conscious way and link in some of the data that I know on campus, sites like the Last Seen Project [and] some of the information on wanted ads. And knowing that some of the former enslaved people went as far away as California and Indiana—[to have] that visualized on a map and have that location so people could see the impact economically, [that] the university and institutions are usually these economic generators and these intellectual generators.

What happens when you look at the economy of slavery

and slavery and capitalism, [and] the economic and intellectual endeavors of those who were formerly enslaved, who tended to be educated because they're on a college campus? How did they impact Black freedom and Reconstruction? Some of the things I think [I can] map and can do that. Can we link the documents we have on that person to that site? If you click on Indianapolis, you will find the obituary of one of the enslaved people who dies in 19-teens. And, like, who made it to Indianapolis? What happened to them? How did they get from Alabama today?

[Basically], you have this interactive map in a way. So, I think that is one the other issues I want to see with augmented reality, the largest category [of] people I find in the sources is unknown. We won't know their names, but we know the type of labor that they did. We know that they carried water. We know they carried wood, and we know they hand-cut the lard. Augmented reality with parsley, interpretive dance, and to get [the] labor that was done in a visual way that's not documented because we don't know their name, but we can acknowledge their presence. And so, for me, teaching tools, other types of spatial analysis, and really make it multi-dimensional to then have people write engaged scholarship that can have new possibilities instead of just looking at a number and looking at an enslaved person thinking about other questions we couldn't ask before.

And for me, [there is] the growth in possibilities that DH, even in my own work. I can now trace people who were

separated during the Civil War and track their reunification. I couldn't have done that 10 years ago. But if I can do that now, what can we do with these college campuses? The digital mapping tool and visualizations will be a part of this new iteration of it. And then, the other is [to] get every single document we know published and digitized, transcribed and tagged, but also to create biographies of the enslaved people that worked at the university and [how], after freedom, [they] created full lives. If they come to the University of Alabama, they learn about Basil Manly. They learn about the presidents, but they also learn about William. You also learn about Moses. They learn about the women who were there and having content. Contextualization. Publications. Short essays. People can use this tool comprehensively. And then also to recognize the labor of those people who are using it and giving them an outlet for publications.

Chambliss: Alright, that's awesome. I want to thank you again for taking the time and talking to me about your project. If people want to find you on the web, how would they do it?

Green: All right, so this is one of the challenges. I have a UAA website. It's long and cumbersome. If you Google Hallowed Grounds and University of Alabama, it comes right up.

DHANASHREE THORAT AND A POSTCOLONIAL DIGITAL HUMANITIES

7

"...I think for me, the most important thing has always been to study race and to think about how colonialism, race, and capitalism as very interlinked systems. I'm thinking about how those things have shaped the world that we have around us."

Dhanashree Thorat

Dr. Dhanashree Thorat is an Assistant Professor of English at Mississippi State University. She received her Ph.D. in English from the University of Florida in 2017. While at the University of Florida (UF), she served as co-convenor of the Digital Humanities Working Group and was lead coordinator for the first THATCamp Gainesville. She was also part of the committee that developed the Digital Humanities Graduate Certificate at UF. She has organized and led DH workshops on various topics including digital archiving, feminist digital humanities, and digital pedagogies. Thorat is a founding Executive Council member of the Center for Digital

Humanities in Pune, India. She serves as the lead organizer for a biennial winter school on Digital Humanities and advises the center on digital archival projects and DH curriculum development. She has written about her experiences with building DH networks in the Global South as a [HASTAC](#) Scholar (2015-2016) and as a postdoctoral researcher in Digital Humanities at the Institute for Digital Research in the Humanities, at the University of Kansas from 2017-2019. In our conversation, we discussed her vision for postcolonial digital humanities praxis.

Keywords

Postcolonial Digital Humanities, Critical Race, Gender, and Pedagogy

The Conversation

Chambliss: The first question I ask everyone is: how do you define Digital Humanities?

Thorat: Okay, the tricky question right off the bat. I guess a couple of different ways. I mean, when I taught my DH class last time, students didn't know what DH was. I like to start with, I think it's Kathleen Fitzpatrick who talks about the age of using digital tools to do humanities research, but also applying humanities frameworks to think about digital cultures, data, and so on. I find that to be a fairly capacious definition. It gives people some idea of what we are doing,

especially if you give people examples, right? So, [in cases where, say, you] are studying Twitter data, you're collecting Twitter data, [and] you've got your big data analytics, but then you're asking humanities questions of Twitter data.

But in the other kinds of contexts—I work in India, or in Asian American studies, and postcolonial studies—I think we need a different kind of specificity because that's a really broad definition. And what exactly does it mean in these other contexts, right? In India, for example, I'm thinking about issues of language. In what language do we do Digital Humanities when India has so many languages? How do we reckon with our history of colonialism, which really permeates everything we do with academia, with humanistic inquiry, with digital humanities? And how do we grapple with things like cost and class and gender in the context of this new field in a place like India? I think what's really important for me is to not just think about that kind of broad definition, but to also think about the challenges or specific contexts, and what those contexts add to [what] we do. I will say right off the bat that I do define DH as very much [part] of the political field, very much of an activist field. And that this is not just about studying digital culture [and] doing humanities, but really about taking a stance and trying to transform some of the systems we see around us.

Chambliss: Right. I think [that's] a really interesting answer because I think, and I will of course post links to your website and things, when people encounter your work, they

often encounter it in a sort of intersectional narrative in the
sense that a lot of your work is sort of dealing with postcolonial
studies [and] really concerned with Asian American
experience. And you're thinking about infrastructure, right?
You make an argument that you're really thinking about how
a kind of codification of hegemonic narratives happens. How
does the world [and] what we think of as normal, how is that
made? You're really using digital humanities as a way to talk
about that. And I think a lot of your work is really interesting
in the sense that you get us to push beyond the surface right
down to the core. How did you find your way to that kind of
practice in the context of Digital Humanities? Because I think
it makes a lot of sense if you recognize that your background is
sort of like English. How did you get there?

Thorat: It feels a little bit like that Wikipedia rabbit hole,
right? If you click on a Wikipedia article and then you see one
[of] those links [and] you click on that, and then, you know,
10 clicks later, somehow you found yourself in a very random
place. I do worry about this because I don't quite know how
I got here, but I think for me, the most important thing has
always been to study race and to think about colonialism and
race and capitalism as very interlinked systems, and how they
have shaped the world that we have around us. And I think
what was really exciting for me [was] to realize that the kind
of training I had as an English Ph.D., whether that was, you
know, close reading analyses [or] working with archives; to
some extent, all of those skills transferred really well to

thinking about digital. And so, I can in fact think about very different things. I can think about Twitter data, but I can also think about internet infrastructure using those same kinds analytical frameworks with that kind of attention to race and thinking about systemic oppression in these very different contexts.

Chambliss: This is a really important question because I think one of the things about digital humanities in the popular imagination and, at some level, as I mentioned to you, I think these conversations we're having, that I'm having in the context of *Reframing History* aren't necessarily going to be revelations for people who are practitioners, right? Like, there's a whole cadre of people who do Digital Humanities, but my standard answer to people [is] why are you having these conversations? Like, you don't have to go very far, you are involved in this group, right? But when you go a little bit away from the group, it becomes very not clear what is happening in terms of Digital Humanities. This is my argument. And you can experience this [on] differing levels.

I mean, you start thinking about the institutional support around these activities at different educational institutions, right? This idea that race and power and identity are wrapped up in the Digital Humanities at some level. I think [that's] one of the things that's emerged as the field has evolved and matured in a contemporary context. If you go back and look at early writing about Digital Humanities, [it] is not necessarily

explicitly talking about how race is inflected. Although race is often at the center of it, right?

Like, one of the first digital humanity projects I ever saw was the Valley of the Shadows Project, right? The granddaddy was all about the Civil War and Ed Ayers and all these other things. And a lot of Ed Ayers' work, I think, is being shaped by these questions of race that are sort of buried in the question of the American South. But you, in particular, your work is very much talking about how those racialized geographies are being recreated, I would argue, within this digital world. Like, you're really sort of thinking about this relationship. And I think that's really interesting because that is part of like a very ardent subset of DH practitioners that have increasingly talked about the dangers of inequality. And I'd really like you to talk a little bit about...some of the concerns you have in the context of this question around power and DH.

Thorat: I mean, this is really interesting because I will say I also came to this intersection of postcolonialism and DH through a project, which was very critical—the Postcolonial Digital Humanities Initiative that Roopika Risam and Adeline Koh started. I was a grad student at that time and encountering it really changed the way I was doing my work because I began to see there was a space to do this kind of intersection[al work]. But it's really interesting because I do think there have been more people taking up this kind of work we've had #transformDH and some really amazing people working in

ethnic studies and DH. I'm thinking about Jessica Marie Johnson's work and really interesting provocative stuff.

But you know what was funny? I was looking at the Wikipedia page for Digital Humanities, the place that so many people go to, right? So, when you go to the references and bibliography on that page, most of the people cited on that page are white. And how do we get to that kind of situation despite all these conversations we've been having? I mean, every year, the DH conference continues to have a lot of recurring issues around power and about whether it (DH) is inclusive, and whether it is welcoming; whether people of color are getting into this conference. We still have a lot of these recurring questions, I think, around DH centers, DH initiatives, and I don't think they've gone away.

Chambliss: Right, yeah. And I think it's one of the things that's interesting… It's funny, you should mention Wikipedia because one of the projects I always talk to students about when I teach things that are digitally inflected [is] about the Rewrite Wikipedia project. And [I] talk about some of the issues that are structurally hidden. [I] talk about [how] the average editor of Wikipedia is a white male, age 30, who lives in the West. And then there's all this activism by groups to Rewrite Wikipedia, be it wiki edit-a-thon around women or [a] wiki edit-a-thon around the global south or African Americans, things like this. So much so it's almost I think like a canonical cottage industry around rewriting Wikipedia, right? I don't mean that in a bad way, but you know, if you normalize

the fact that it's kinda racist and so this is a way for you to fix it, did you really? Yeah, it's good that you're fixing it, but...

Thorat: Can it be fixed? I think that's the question. Can you actually fix it?

Chambliss: It is growing every day, right? It's not like it's frozen in time and you come through and [fixing] it. And no one's ever going to make a change. It is literally growing every day. Are there enough people there? Are there enough hands concerned with this liberatory narrative to balance out the hands that don't care about the liberatory narrative? I'm not saying you should not have wiki edit-a-thon, but it goes to this question; especially since you do have a choice about what you consume. And you've not ever confronted these questions [even though] we are in academia every day? There are some things that only happen in academia. And I say that to my colleagues all the time. They ask me what do you mean by that?

I'm like, "I guarantee you no one ever is concerned about the number of X that are hired in a given day in 95% of all organizational structures." They never talk about it. It doesn't work. They talk about [it], but their goal is to make money nine times out of 10. And if that is happening, they will ignore any number of things, whereas we won't stop and go wait a minute, right? And so, this is a really important question. But I want to think about this and then [the] context [of] some of your other work, because I think one of the other ways you define yourself is [by], at least in my mind, the effort you made

in terms of actively organizing structures linked to teaching and learning in DH.

And what does that mean in terms of the future digital humanities? Like, how has that process been for you as a very young academic, right? Like, an early career academic. This is another one of these hidden questions around academia, especially, again, you get a little inside baseball, but there's a difference between your role as a teacher and a scholar at the kind of R1 institutions that we're at versus my old institution, which was literally characterized as a teaching institution. So, how has that whole pathway mattered in terms of your approach to DH and [how has] that been beneficial to you as a practitioner, as a theorist, as a scholar?

Thorat: I would say it has been very beneficial, that it has been very productive to be involved in what would probably be called "service work," organizing events, leading workshops. And it is tricky because I feel like I still look at my CV and I have a much longer list of service work than I do publications. Then that's a challenge as I move into a tenure track position, but I do need to check off those traditional boxes of work. But, for me, it's been really important to be involved with a DH center in India. In Pune, they're doing a DH winter school every other year. And do we also be involved in the US with THATCamp Florida, which we did for quite some time together and THATCamp Gainesville, as well.

I think what was really important for me, especially in India, was to think with people there and to see the kind of DH

emerging and [how] people there were defining [it] for
themselves. I didn't want this to be a kind of less important
"cool new thing" that's happening in the West, but really
[more about] how people are interested in shaping that field
in India. Given the kind of work I do, which is postcolonial
[and therefore] does have a connection to India. I do think
having that connection is really important. For me, that was
also about ethical collaboration, about giving back to a
community that has sustained me. And it ended up being
very enriching for my work because I had new ideas talking to
people, sharing ideas with people, brainstorming specificities
of work. I think, on the one hand, those kinds of events were
really useful and productive and enriching.

But the teaching, I think, is the other piece that I've really
enjoyed; [like] bringing digital methods into the classroom,
and we do actually do Wikipedia edit-a-thon in my class. [In]
my class last term, [we] edited Edwidge Danticat's Wikipedia
page. We added sections of her novel and added themes from
her novel to one of the pages. And it's been really fun to do
that with students because students begin to think about
these technologies that surround them. And how can you
actually change these technologies? How can you change these
platforms so you're not just consuming them?

Having that kind of opportunity to transform systems is
really important for students, and to connect that to local
community [by] thinking locally about what's going on
around that. For example, this term, I'll be teaching in

Mississippi and we are going to be working with Fannie Lou Hamer speeches. And she was a Mississippian, a local civil rights activist. Thinking about somebody like that, and then thinking about that in the context of DH [for] students who are very local, I think is very, very important. I'm not sure all of this work will count for tenure at the end of the day, but I think this is something I value. I intend to keep doing it.

Chambliss: It's funny you should say that. I mean, I had a conversation like that in my job. They asked me [if I] was I still going to keep doing the digital stuff? I said "Yes, and it's always going to be about Black people, too!" It's really interesting to think a little bit about this question of does it count, right? Because this is also one of these classic DH questions: is the thing you're doing counting? But it's interesting because we usually couch that in terms of, "is the project you created gonna count towards something," right? As opposed to [when] you're actually teaching about the infrastructure of the universe that we live in, does that count?

Thorat: Yeah. The question of impact is so interesting, right, because how do we measure impact? Like, *who* is it impacting? If this is really about educators, if we are teaching our students to think through certain systems, that is an impact, right? If you are reaching community members who were enabled to do their own work, that is its own impact.

Chambliss: That should be enough, right? Like that should be good, right? And this gets me to another question, because I think one of the things that's really interesting about talking

to you is that your work is less defined by tools and more defined, at some level, by trying to understand the nature of technoculture. And that question really becomes a question of, at least I want to ask you: are we asking the right questions when we're talking about DH, right? From your perspective, as someone who's thinking about this, you're stepping back and going like, "This is the nature of the world that we live in," are we having the right set of conversations? Are we asking the right questions when we think about DH?

Thorat: I mean, I'm probably going to be totally biased when I say this, but I foreground identity and power when we talk about DH and, for me, that is the most important thing. All questions begin there. And I think a lot of people will probably disagree with that. And I think that's fine. Some people may have other things they want to do, but I do think thinking about how power and how gender and other systems of power intersect with our work is really crucial for me. Questions either begin there, or in some ways those become important analogies [and] questions, regardless of the kind of work we do.

Chambliss: And I think that that's not an unreasonable answer.

Thorat: We might both be biased here.

Chambliss: Well, I think it's definitely a question [of] how do we approach the question of what DH is. Obviously, I always tell students [that it] doesn't matter what tool you use, which is a horrible thing to say if you're a certain kind of

practitioner, right? Like, I don't care, tools are not the most important thing here. The most important thing is the idea, right? The simplest tool is the best is my first answer, right? So, these questions about power, I think, are increasingly becoming definitional; not because of anything that you and I might think, but because [it's] one of the things that happens as a field matures. And I think we're getting to a place where we're in these questions of what are we doing when we do DH, I'm being more and more inflected by the goal of the kind of work that's being produced in this field.

I often talk about the stuff I do as a project of recovery, [like, that] very particular way of thinking about it because, you know, it's not that we don't know what happened. We're trying to recover a fuller picture of what's happening to African Americans. And I think the same could be said for a lot of people who are dealing with minority groups or marginalized groups and doing digital projects or trying to recover some sort of sense of depth and nuance and complexity to their experience. Other people may not necessarily be [doing] so, but I do think that's one of the things that may unify some of this work—that's much more inflected by questions of ethnic studies or Black studies or social history questions, and things like that. But that does mean that there are questions about the path forward, right? And so, for you, as a practitioner and as a person thinking about these things from a structural standpoint, what do you see as big obstacles

for you and what are a big opportunities as you project forward in terms of your work?

Thorat: I mean, I think in terms of challenges, funding is always a question. Getting funded for the kind of work we want to do, which is often very critical. And [it] can seem threatening to white institutions or to white supremacy. How do you get funding for that kind of work without compromising the kind of work you want [to do]? I think that is always an issue for me. But I think a lot of the really interesting opportunities that I see—and I think it's okay if I'm not part of this because I think sometimes you do kind of have to step back and let other people do the work they want to do—but seeing the way DH is developing in other contexts, for example, in India, where I am involved. But again, I have to kind of step back because I am located in the US and seeing those kinds of developments in India and even seeing questions adjacent to DH being asked outside of academic institutions.

NGOs, for example, [are] doing work around feminism or issues of sexuality in digital culture. We have a number of these kinds of activist NGOs in India that are doing very interesting work but obviously don't claim DH as their operating field. So, I think there's a lot of fascinating, important work that's also happening adjacent to academia that we may not be involved in. But I think that is totally fine. Seeing those kinds of conversations has been very exciting and I do think we will be seeing more of those in the future.

And then, just personally speaking, what's exciting is to see where students take this work. As a postdoc at KU (University of Kansas) I've worked with HASTAC scholars and seen folks come into DH in their first year of their masters. Then, two years later, they are doing this amazing work in very different areas. And that to me is really important. How do we enable that new generation of scholars and really bring in that vein of critical DH very early on? They are thinking in that kind of approach going forward. For me, [it] is really important to see where students will take that [and make] more [of what] you want to see out there.

Chambliss: Yeah. You know, I think it will be interesting because the next generation of students are going to be much more tech savvy. I think one of the things that's interesting is the question about tools, especially for people in graduate school. Maybe one of the limitations—if they're in a good program—they're going to pick up some technical skills and be able to do something. Cause I don't think necessarily that you're going to be able to continue to be in DH, projecting forward and just simply doing something using a digital tool. There is going to be a question about you [did] that was different. What did you do that was paradigm shifting? And so, there's going to be a push, I think, for people that have the skills to do something in terms of explanatory or interpreting a new space that is clearly pushing the boundaries. That has its dangers because you're going to have to be at a place that has resources to provide you the tools.

Thorat: You can't do it without resources.

Chambliss: You can't do it. You know, I always talk about the Death Star Problem. When you build the Death Star, you blow up planets, but you got to get the Death Star to blow up planets and that costs money. It's always about money, the dirty little secret [of] DH.

Thorat: You're right. And, I mean, I'm not sure, but I do look around and I wonder. I mean, are PhD programs training grad students in digital methodology? Then, I'm not sure of the answer is "yes." I think there's a lot more of us who are interested in training grad students, but I'm not sure it is common.

Chambliss: I think that's true. I mean, I think that's actually been one of the things we're really interested in about my new position, right? Like, MSU has a really robust digital community and finding the pathway as a graduate student, I think, [is] complicated. You can do it, but I don't think it's as simple as you might think it might be from the outside looking in. I think that's a good place to stop. "It's more complicated than you might think" is the answer.

Thorat: It's always the answer, right?

Chambliss: Yeah. It's always [the] answer. I want to thank you again for taking the time to talk to me. If people want to find you online, they can find you at...

Thorat: They [can] find my website, *dhanashreethorat.com*. They can find me on Twitter. They can find me at a lot of places. I guess that's what it means to be a DH person.

Chambliss: That's true. You gotta [have] a fierce DH profile. This will be a highly downloaded episode.

Thorat: I will keep my fingers crossed. I will look for my emails in my mailbox.

Chambliss: All right. Well, thank you.

ROOPIKA RISAM AND NEW DIGITAL WORLDS

8

> "...so really what I ended up shifting into was focusing my research on how do we then actually use the affordances of these digital platforms and digital tools to push back against that reinscription of canon through digital humanities scholarship."
>
> Roopika Risam

Roopika Risam is a key figure in the postcolonial digital humanities discussion. She is Associate Professor of English and the Faculty Fellow for Digital Library Initiatives at Salem State University. Dr. Risam's research interests lie at the intersections of postcolonial and African diaspora studies, humanities knowledge infrastructures, digital humanities, and new media. Her book, *New Digital Worlds: Postcolonial Digital Humanities in Theory, Praxis, and Pedagogy*, was published by Northwestern University Press in 2018. A central concern for Risam is how we think about digital humanities as a knowledge practice. Not surprisingly, her path to this concern is linked to questions of race and power. As a digital humanist and a public intellectual, she's paving a path for

scholars who hope DH will be a tool for a more equitable future.

Keywords

Digital Atlantic, Digital Infrastructure, Black Studies, Latinx Studies, Computational Design

The Conversation

Chambliss: I wanted to talk to you for a couple of reasons. One, when people think about digital humanities, especially a particular strand of digital humanities, I think your name is one of the names that comes to the fore. I also think a lot of the work you do foreshadows pathways that are important to the evolution of [the] digital humanities field. I know for you, like everyone, [this is] going to be a difficult question, but the first question I always ask people is: how do you define Digital Humanities?

Risam: Well, so I may have my stock answer, right? And my stock answer is that it's anything that's at the intersection of humanities research and technical inquiry. But to dig down a little bit into that, I think about it primarily having two components, the first of which is using a range of digital tools to interpret humanities data. And then, on the flip side, using all of the lenses of inquiry we have for analysis from the humanities and applying that to digital cultures, digital platforms, how the Internet works, how algorithms work, to

how surveillance is working. I favor the more expansive definition because what I really think is most useful, interesting, and provocative about digital humanities is that it's not a closed method; that it's a method of possibility and a method of exploration. I like the idea of leaving space for kinds of scholarship that, right now, we can't even imagine.

Chambliss: Right. So, one of the things I think that's really interesting about you as a figure in Digital Humanities—and I don't want to impose definitional descriptors on you—[but] I think one of the things that's very noticeable about you as a scholar is that you're a very public scholar. Like, you're a public intellectual. And the work you do is [often] transmitted through a robust ecosystem of digital humanities communications that people who are involved in the field participate in. So, like, these online forums, [etc.]. And in terms of some of the work you do, the projects you actually do are deeply inflected by public debates and broader questions of policy and practice, history and power, and things like that in the United States and in the hemisphere, right? It's like a postcolonial project, I would say.

I think your work is often unified by a concern about equity and structure. And I wonder, from your perspective, how did that pathway emerge for you to intersect so strongly with the digital? Because I think you could make the argument that, in terms of your training and your background and where you are, it doesn't necessarily have to be digital. What is [it] that digital gets you in terms of your work and your development

as a scholar? How did that become "Yes, this is how I'm going to do it"?

Risam: That's a really great question because often I struggle with feeling like I've cemented my reputation as a scholar of digital studies, which in many ways is really a very meta thing. It's really about how we do digital humanities research more so than it is about actually doing research with digital methods in the areas in which I'm trained, which are African diaspora and postcolonial studies. So that's been a really interesting and unexpected development for me. I mean, I really find that my greater interest is in how we create equitable structures for scholarship, particularly for communities of color. So, that's why the meta research really captured my attention. But actually, my inroad into digital humanities was very much a practical response to trying to solve a research problem. So, when I was writing my dissertation, when I was a graduate student at Emory, I was doing research on Black radicalism and transnationalism and trying to think through the intersections of different radical activist movements in the US and in postcolonial cultures as well.

And I really found that I struggled to write about them. Like, I struggled to write down on paper what seemed to me to feel like this very fluid multi-directional, exchange of knowledge and exchange of practices and exchange of values. And so, I was in the Huey Newton Papers at Stanford, in the archives, looking through the material in there. And I came

across the rolls of subscribers to the Black Panther newspaper and I was just kind of looking through it. And it was very interesting because it was really showing this kind of global exchange of information. It was finding subscriber addresses all over the world. And it was one of those moments where I thought, "Wait a minute, if I could map this and then potentially think about other ways of mapping different routes of communication between other groups…" because there are also telegrams from the Viet Cong.

I mean, there was a lot of exchange beyond the subscriber rolls in the material in [the] Newton Papers. You know, maybe this could be a way for me to just think through some of these connections in a way I couldn't when trying to write them down in just textual form. It was that multimodal dimension, that possible ability of spatial representation that allowed me to think through some of the ideas I was working with. Ultimately, I would write a textual dissertation, but it turned into a useful tool for me for thinking.

And, you know, I've always been interested and inclined towards technology, even since I was a child. When I did my master's degree at Georgetown University, I was a fellow at their Center for New Designs and Learning and scholarship. We were doing a lot of work then with digital storytelling, with this brand new thing called wikis. [That] shows my age, [but] we were really thinking about different ways we could use programs to engage students with texts like Dante's *Inferno*. I had a little bit of a background from there in terms

of thinking about the intersections of technology in the humanities. And so, it wasn't a surprise that I would come back to that as a potential solution to a problem. And what I found then, you know, while simultaneously working on my dissertation and just trying to solve this very practical problem, was that I was really interested in the way that so much digital humanities scholarship tended to reproduce all of the canons of literature and history that we already have existing in analog forms. That became a subject in and of itself.

And that's how I got into this meta infrastructural-level research, because I was sort of interested in thinking through how this area, which at that point was relatively new [to] digital humanities, was really reproducing a lot of the hierarchies of knowledge that already exist while simultaneously having so much potential to challenge them. So, really what ended up shifting into was focusing my research on [the question of] how we actually use the affordances of these digital platforms, these digital tools, to push back against that reinscription of canon through digital humanities scholarship.

Chambliss: Wow. Okay. I think that's really interesting because, of course, when we think about Digital Humanities now, one of the things that really dominates the public understanding around it is tools and what those tools do. And this is a kind of long-standing tension within the field. I think one of the things [that's] also interesting about hearing your pathway into the work is it wasn't necessarily about tools [as]

it was the implication of what kind of knowledge [was] being created that really animated your involvement with these things.

That kind of leads me to my next question. When people talk about digital humanities, they often are mired in this idea around it that, unlike the other humanities (which "don't have any value"), [DH has value] because we put "digital" on top of it. They have the kind of tangible element. People understand computers do things. So, therefore, these humanities scholars are doing something because they are doing things digital. And it obscures a whole level of thought, debate, [and] critical conversations that are trapped at some level in a kind of materiality that we assigned digital things.

And one of the things that's really interesting about you is that a lot of your work is about structure. It's about thinking about how the world knows something, it is about epistemology. And so, for you, and when you think about your pathway as a scholar, where do you see your work going in terms of this bigger question of Digital Humanities? Like, how do you see yourself fitting into this ongoing scholarly evolution? Because I do think it's evolving. I don't ever want to say anything is settled. I just think there's always a question, there's always some dominant narratives, and some of these narratives under the radar can be very interesting, but are always sort of obscured from public view. How do you see that whole process playing out?

Risam: So, I mentioned earlier that something that really

drives me is this question of how can [we] continue to build and sustain the capacity of scholars in areas like African diaspora, Latinx, Indigenous postcolonial, [and] critical ethnic studies to undertake digital scholarship. In many ways, it feels like there are some barriers to entry, particularly around the technical dimensions [and] particularly if you don't have experience with coding. For example, although there are so many out-of-the-box tools that obviate the need to even learn to code, I've found myself having a shift in thinking around this question of what kind of level of technological competency scholars of color need to be able to effectively do the work to intervene in [the]—what I call in my book, "new digital world,"—the digital cultural record to ensure that record isn't just of Anglophone culture and Anglophone white culture.

What I've been coming around to is this thinking about the ways we can build up the capacities of our communities to do more technical research. And I came to this in a very strange way, which is that, last summer, you may have seen the project Torn Apart / Separados [that] a number of us undertook in response to the immigrant detention and family separation policy. And the series of data visualizations, mostly map-based, [on] which we did some analysis of the locations of immigrant detention centers, the location of shelters that are being used to detain children. We did some data visualization around the finances and government contracts that ICE gives out to support the immense infrastructure of immigrant

detention. And what happened was, when we did the first part, which was just about where the detention centers [are], everything was coded by one person on our team.

And he just did everything. The rest of us did research. We did [it] thinking we were applying our backgrounds in postcolonial, border, and Latinx studies to how we were designing the project, but the actual coding was done by Moacir, who's now at Columbia and a data librarian. What happened with the second volume was I ended up scraping all the government contracts for five years of ICE money. And then, we had a larger dataset and we spent some time prototyping how we wanted to visualize this dataset. And we were understanding that we had another person who was willing code on that team and it so happened that, by the time we finished prototyping the visualizations, the coder said, "You know what? I have other priorities and need to attend to those. And can't work with you."

I mean, totally understandable [because that] graduate student [was] also involved in unionization at the university. We totally understood. But then we came down to this problem, which was [that] we had imagined a project that needed to be done relatively quickly, but that was so large we couldn't just rely on the work of a single coder. I had to learn how to code in JavaScript and I had to learn how to do D3 data visualization. And I actually had not really thought I could. It was this moment where, when the rubber hits the road, where we needed the labor. I discovered that it wasn't that I couldn't

do it, it was that I just [hadn't] ever had a compelling enough reason to sit down and learn how to do it. And I think that, in some ways, we've had these debates in Digital Humanities for the last decade over, [whether] you have to code [and] who has to code or not?

I've always fallen along the side of the argument that Miriam Posner made in 2010 when she said, "Think twice before you exhort everyone to learn how to code. There are people who, for gendered and racialized reasons, have been disincentivized and socialized to think they can't learn to code. I had just kind of patted myself on the back for nearly 10 years saying, "Okay, see, I can't code because it turns out I had just been using that as an excuse to not learn how to code," because I thought, "well, I don't have to." And, you know, I was able to functionally do the projects I needed to do with the out-of-the-box tools available to me. But then I found that, once I had a better understanding of the foundations of computation, and once I understood a little bit about how this code worked into what was happening, it actually opened up so many more possibilities for the research I could do.

What I'm doing right now is actually that dissertation I mentioned on Black radicalism [that] focused a lot on W.E.B. Du Bois and reframing him and the global dimensions of his career. Because a lot of the biographies say his global turn comes later in his life. Really, if you look at his work, it doesn't mean it was not there from the beginning. I started envisioning a series of data visualizations that would actually make the case

for this kind of long-term global commitment in his career. And that's one of the projects I'm working on right now and it was something I couldn't have even imagined from a research project design perspective without having even just a very, very basic understanding of the foundations of computation. And so, I mean, that's something I'm really interested in now going forward, is thinking of ways of designing collaborative projects. I can bring people in who, like me, thought they couldn't do it and help them gain some of the skills to actually do it. And then, who knows what's possible for our research.

Chambliss: You sound like a convert. I want to go back to one of the things you said. You mentioned you had previously been able to do everything you needed to with things that are out-of-the-box. I find that really interesting because I also don't code and I'm probably the same way. It's like, "well, no," and [at] no point has my life depended on me being able to code. If it did, I would code. Like, I know that if anything was deterministic, then I would be like, "Oh God, if I don't do this, I die." So, I would do it, right? I mean, that's what tenure is built on—threat, not love. I know people don't want to believe it is, but let's be honest here. It's built on threat.

I think [the] interesting thing about the dichotomy that developed—and you alluded to—is, if you don't make something, then you didn't do DH at some level. I personally have thought [it] a fairly elite statement that did allude to a kind of differential in resources available to people. So that, the vast majority of projects that people know... And when I say

"people," I mean, a general educated public that might be on online. Not academics per se, but they may be academic. You know, they read *Slate Magazine*. *Slate* is a publication that a lot of people read [who] have this interest in DH. And for that public, they see certain digital projects and that's DH for them. And it's for lack of a broad generalization, but for the most part, [it's] coming from a very small set of actors who are coming from very heavily resourced places.

And then there's a whole set of other people, myself included, who are drawn to digital things because [of] its ability to democratize information and its ability to create relationships and actually, at some level, recover community narratives [and] stories that should be a part of the canon but can't be because of the way the canon was built. And so, by creating these digital projects, you can sort of create these connections, right? It's almost like an insurgent thing. And I hear in your answer a real evolution in your thought, but also perhaps an evolution in the field in the sense [of] this empowering of the individual to create work and how that will change question. [It] is, I think, something we do see with, quite frankly, younger scholars.

So this requirement to do more I think of as a really interesting point, and I hear in your answer something that touches on a really complicated transformation that's taking place because [of] the desire, [the] requirement to produce something that will generate new knowledge has always been part of academia. But when you add the digital to it, like what

you just described, what kind of questions—[what] kind of things—can I do now that I know the coding?

Do you see that as, as perhaps another complicated burden for people? [I ask] especially because I think some of this is about training in academia. What kind of consistency do we have around training and [the] digital humanities practice? My personal response is there is no consistency. I honestly [think] there's not a lot of consistency here. We all talk about it, but how you arrive at actually doing it [is] totally different. I want to ask you about that. What do you see as the implications of this transformation?

Risam: Well, just back up a second and say that I consider, if you, for example, make a digital exhibit using Omeka or use WordPress, that's as much making something as coding is. I don't want to privilege or over-privileged coding as a particular form of knowledge and insight that you can't get from working on a platform like Omeka. I think Omeka, too, raises questions that complicate how we think about humanities research and coding is just another dimension raising another set of questions. Because it partially [is] because of this over-privileging, the elitism around coding, that was really a part of the discourse of Digital Humanities, particularly about a decade ago [it] was disenfranchising to people like me who did not have the resources, the time, the job, to be able to learn how to do this. And I very much was excited about the fact that there are platforms like Omeka, WordPress, and Gephi

that allowed me to do this kind of work and lowered that barrier to entry.

I think it is a both-and in the sense that I believe we continue building up people's capacities to use the out-of-the-box tools and to think about how those change the questions of our research. But then, I think there's also this added dimension that, if it's useful to your research, if it allows you to work with the dataset that you wouldn't really be able to work with as effectively without it, then it's worth taking the time to learn. But I think this does get back to this question of how we are training graduate students. And I think this is a particularly interesting question in light of certain ideas. There [was] an article in *The Chronicle* in the last couple of days around Columbia University's English Department not placing any students in tenure track jobs and then bringing in a cohort of 19 students for their new class and suggesting they need summer internships in art galleries and that's gonna solve everything. There are so many art gallery and museum jobs out there just waiting to take Columbia PhDs in English.

But yeah, this question around this environment, where there are so many streams on the humanities in particular in higher ed more generally. I mean, we [write] at public institutions, we know this. Our institutions battle with this financial question and defunding from state legislatures, as well. I think what we need to be doing is thinking about how our graduate programs are preparing students for the existence of humanities at a moment in time when it's

deinstitutionalized. And we can't count on the existence of PhD programs in humanities. I gave a talk last spring. Now, the university I will not name, and I was sort of making this point. I was saying, "You know, we really need to be thinking about how we're training graduate students and for what purpose." They can learn to code, and they can learn to use these digital humanities out-of-the-box tools, even more easily. And this will open up new questions [and] new audiences for their research. This will open up new possibilities for their careers if accompanied by the right kind of professional development.

The professor who invited me said, "Well, if my graduate student told me she wanted to take two weeks and work on Torn Apart / Separados I would have said, 'you know what, [it's] a waste of time. You should be writing your dissertation.'" And I said to that professor, "You are preparing your students for a future that is fictional. And it is a future where the humanities continue to thrive in a way that it isn't presently. And instead, we need to be thinking about preparing people to sustain the humanities and sustain the digital cultural record beyond that." And this is not just at the graduate student level. It's also at the undergraduate level because the vital survival of the humanities right now can't hinge on funding from universities because it's not working for us. I like this as a backup plan for the humanities, too.

Chambliss: This is the black box generation. We're going to have to train a whole set of people who are going to be, at some level in their core, able to preserve the record through this

dark age and then turn around and say, "This is the record. It's in structured data form. We can slot it into the new thing that you're going to fund." [And] you know, at some level you're right. Because I actually think this is one of the things that is really important when you start thinking about institutions at a lower level, [like] more localized institutions that are very interested in documenting community. [They] often reach out the scholars or develop relationships with scholars that help them do that work.

I recently came from the Association for African American Museums meeting and that was central. You have administrators for super small organizations, sometimes with a staff of four to seven people who are serving a small community; they are a cultural institution and they produce programs and bring people in. They want to know how they [can] create digital work. How can we sustain it? What are some of the practices? Because we're there, we're doing that work. And that's a legitimate point. We need to have some conversations with those people and help them develop their infrastructure and help them sustain themselves.

And so, when you think about your future work—and I know you're working on a book built [on] your dissertation work—but is the pathway you're on looking at these things in a more traditional but also in an alternative mode moving forward? Are you going to develop these things that are traditional academic projects but also be developing things that may be outside that and sort of live in a public place

and rely on public infrastructure? How do you see your work developing as you suss out this future where the humanities isn't in the same mode as it used to be?

Risam: One of the questions or issues I've been thinking of a lot lately, and it's definitely going to be a chapter in the new book that I'm writing. [It's] this question around expertise and the way the university has tried to consolidate itself as the locus of expertise. Whereas, if you go to your colleagues in the museum world, they have expertise too. If we go into communities or people just doing whatever they're doing, they have expertise too. And there's a way the university tends to try and prove its value by claiming they are the sole inheritors of knowledge and the social stewards of knowledge. And so, what I'm really interested in [in] the work I'm doing—yes, some of it is traditional, right? I'm reading another monograph. I'm doing this Du Bois data visualization project that's based on my dissertation, because I never wrote a book from my dissertation. Instead, I'm turning it into data project maps about communicating mostly with other researchers, not so much with the general public.

But then I also have a number of projects I've been working on for some time about how we build connections across the lines between university and community. And how do we think about public humanities and digital public humanities as a way of recognizing and valuing expertise that resides outside the academy and outside the reward structures of the academy? For example, I've been running a high school digital

humanities program in partnership with a local high school in Salem. We take students at this school, who are predominantly Latinx, and engage them with a history of Salem and the history of immigration in Salem, and help them articulate their place within the rich history of immigration in the city and Massachusetts. And, in the meantime, they learn about the history of Salem. They learn how to do archival research. They learn about writing for multiple audiences and publics. It's really been an interesting [experience].

I mean, on a cynical level, it turned into a really awesome recruiting tool. At the beginning of the semester, none of those students were coming to Salem State and, by the end of the semester, five of them were coming to Salem State. I was working at orientation and I ran into them and they were so excited to already have a connection into the university. You're bringing them into the university and bringing them into the archives and working with them. But really what was most meaningful about doing that with the students who, you know, these were not AP students, these were not honors students. We intentionally partnered with a teacher who wanted to give an opportunity to the kinds of students who don't always get these kinds of pre-college [or] early college special opportunities. We wanted the kind of students who do come to our regional public university. [We wanted to have] them in this position where they became the experts and used their own knowledge and their own experiences. And to put that into conversation with the research they had done, that

was really exciting. That's [the] kinds of interventions you need to simultaneously be taking place.

I'm working with Carol Stabile from University of Oregon and I created a publishing collective to find writing by women and women of color in media industries. [We're trying] to find the material in their archives and get the rights and publish them as eBooks so people [can] teach them. A part of this is trying to intervene in the need to diversify curriculum, particularly in making this material openly available for high school teachers, as well. So, that's another way public focus comes into the work. And now, the downside of this is that the traditional reward structures of the university don't really recognize this. They recognize the book [but] that's about it. So, there is that side. I think some of us doing this kind of work are trying to also think through, theoretically, how we make the claim for the value of this work to get it recognized within [those] reward structures as well.

Chambliss: I think both of those projects [and] working with the community, of course, is a really important part of what institutions say they want. It's often sequestered under that "general service" category in tenure and promotion. And for the listener who doesn't know, the general academic rewards are divided between research, teaching, and service. Depending on the institution you're at, those percentages are very different, right? They tend to be 40% research, 40% teaching and 20% service. At least that is how it is written on the page, but once you're in the system, that research part is

more like 80%. And that teaching part is like 15%, and the service thing actually doesn't count toward anything, unless they're looking for something to screw you over [on].

Risam: Yes. I mean, we don't even have percentages. I could be optimistic and look at that and say, "Oh, you can decide where you choose to focus your research." But no, really you have to divine [what] this provost...and that Dean...thinks you should be doing.

Chambliss: Right. How do they feel about what you just did? Which just puts a lot of pressure on people of color and women because they're often saddled with a lot of invisible service. There's a huge [body of] literature about visible service. And I think in digital work, there's also a tremendous amount of invisible labor. There's always labor involved in anything digital. It is either painfully individualistic labor you did it all yourself and that was a horrible, or it's painful group labor you all did working together, and that was also horrible because you did not get credit. It's really interesting to hear you talk about those projects because it does point to these broader questions. And, as you know, there's a lot of discussion about the rules and regulations around how we build these projects to recognize labor. And we're not going to exploit students.

I think about this a lot because a lot of work I did was with undergraduates, and they walked into a classroom, like, "we're gonna do this thing as digital. We're not going to write a paper." And they weren't necessarily happy about that. They were trained to expect papers and they're making this digital

thing and it turned out okay, I guess, but who knows. But it is a question. And I think about that at a public institution even more because I'm often saying, "Yeah, we're not going to do a paper. We're going to do a digital thing and we're going to put it in something and it's going to be a repository." And hopefully this is going to help with public understanding about X. And that's a goal for this project, right? That's a goal for us. And it's not settled. So, I wish you luck with all those things, I think all of them sound really cool.

I always think it's really interesting to hear practitioners talk about the work and talk about their goals around the work. I really appreciate you taking the time to talk through some of these things. I know a lot of people know you from online and I think you can Google your name and get a sense of hearing you talk about the importance of community cultivated digitally. I think it's great to have the opportunity [to] talk through some of the intricacies of your work. I really appreciate you taking the time to do that.

Risam: Thank you for having me.

PART III
CULTURAL REPRODUCTION AND DIGITAL HUMANITIES

A core benefit of digital praxis is the ability to accomplish something using digital tools that cannot be achieved working in a more traditional manner. The legacy of literary digital humanities is the most obvious expression of this idea, but using digital to explore humanities questions can take many forms. In this section, the experiences of Amy Derogatis, Brooks Hefner, Robert Cassanello, Laurie Taylor, and Connie L. Lester offer different perspectives on using digital methods to answer humanities questions.

AMY DEROGATIS AND THE SOUND OF RELIGION

9

"...there is an answer that is about engaging the larger public and then there's an answer that is about interrogating categories amongst scholars in the study of religion."

Amy Derogatis

Dr. Amy DeRogatis, Professor of Religion at Michigan State University, and her partner Isaac Weiner, Associate Professor in the Department of Comparative Studies at Ohio State University, head the [American Religious Sounds Project](#), a collaborative digital initiative supported by the Henry Luce Foundation that seeks to document and interpret the diversity of American religious life by attending to its varied sonic cultures. I wanted to talk with Dr. DeRogatis because her project reached a notable milestone in 2019, but also because her journey toward Digital Humanities was shaped by a distinctly disciplinary concern.

Keywords

Religion, Sound Studies, Digital Humanities, Undergraduate Research, Graduate Research, Community Engagement, Soundscape

The Conversation

Chambliss: Amy DeRogatis, thank you for joining me here at *Reframing History*. How are you doing today?

DeRogatis: I'm doing great. Thanks for having me on.

Chambliss: Well, I know you're co-PI [and] Isaac Weiner is unable to join us. He originally was going to be here and I'm sorry to miss him. Hopefully we'll get a chance to direct people to his information, but I wanted to talk to you for this season of *Reframing History*, as I mentioned to you before, because we're talking about Digital Humanities this season and you are my colleague. And for those of you who've been listening, you know that I've talked to quite a few people at MSU at this point. I was really intrigued in part because we're MSU; we have this massive email system that sometimes gives us information about digital humanities and I saw that your project, which I knew you've been working on for a while, reach a really public stage.

The American Religious Sound Project, which is a project between you and Isaac and between MSU and Ohio State, is now live. And I'd been to the website, seen the interface, seen

all the stuff that you've been doing there. And I thought it would be really great to talk to you about that. I know that you published *Saving Sex: Sexuality and Salvation in American Evangelicalism* in 2015 and I was also intrigued by the fact that I thought to myself, this is the next big project and it's digital, which is really interesting. Tell me a little bit about how you got to this point. What was your training and was Digital Humanities always a part of that?

DeRogatis: Thanks so much. First of all, it is so great to be on the podcast with you and [I'm] especially happy to spend some time talking with you because you're one of my favorite more recent colleagues here and we usually meet in the hall or sadly meet in a meeting. It's such a great opportunity to feel like we're just chatting it up in a coffee shop and such a privilege to be with you today. Thank you so much.

There is the genesis of the actual project, which I am happy to talk about, and there's also the beginning story; the myth story for me around my entrance into Digital Humanities. Let me start by saying that my co-director, Isaac Weiner, who's a professor in the comparative literature program at Ohio State University and is also a specialist [on] religion in the United States as I am, wrote a dissertation that was published into a book called *Religion Out Loud*. That was published I think in 2014 [by] NYU press. And that book was about—here I'm speaking for him—so just broadly speaking, one of the themes of that book was religious noise controversies over the centuries in the United States. [He] did a lot of work on the

ways in which religious sound can be seen as sound or noise depending on who's making claims about it. And that sound often brings communities together in what's often seen as secular spaces as well as sacred spaces. And it's just a terrific, amazing book.

One of the chapters is around a sound controversy in Hamtramck, Michigan. His first job was at Georgia State. He teamed up with a faculty member there and they were incorporating audio recordings into classroom activities. While he was at Georgia State, he had started this project and gained experience doing field recordings around religious sound. Then [he] moved to Ohio State and the two of us hooked up around a funding opportunity called Humanities Without Walls (HWW). That year, they were interested in people who would do collaborative research across two institutions around the topic of the global Midwest.

Chambliss: Right. So, the Humanities Without Walls grant, where was that from again?

DeRogatis: That's a Mellon-funded grant administered through the University of Illinois. And so, big long backstory, but we put together parallel teams of faculty and students and did a pilot project over the summer. We called it the Religious Sound Map because, at that point, we were thinking more about sound mapping. [We] applied for a grant [and] got our initial grant through HWW. That was about two years and incorporated classroom activities with a lot of undergraduate researchers. Some [were] paid, some were in classrooms. And

we built a nice platform for a religious sound map with some interviews and other stuff. Mostly undergraduates built [it] at MSU and launched that.

But before we launched, the Luce Foundation came to us and said, "We're hearing about this cool collaborative project, maybe you'd like to scale up and make some changes." So that was our second phase of the grant, which was primarily hiring a multimedia production person named [Lauren Pond], who's at Ohio State. It was also hiring some graduate students at both MSU and OSU to project manage, hiring and paying undergraduate researchers at both institutions, doing lots and lots of field recordings, working on getting metadata standards and beginning to build this platform, which [was] primarily built by the OSU app dev team. Then, Luce came back to us again and said, "Would you be interested in scaling up?" And so that is the grant that we're currently doing. That started last June and this is a much larger grant where we have finished building the site that just went live, but now this grant has four domains.

We're running an awards competition for scholars and giving out grants for people to do innovative work on religion and sound. And we have an advisory board that's going to work with the people who get the awards, and then also an app dev team that will help them think about how they'll present on our platform. It's multimedia from the get-go. We have geographic expansions, so we're taking what we've learned about using our project in the classroom. We have a manual.

We've piloted our project at Georgia State, University of Wisconsin Milwaukee, and St. Louis University. Now we want to move nationally. We're doing that.

We are going to run a workshop for people interested in religion and sound before our annual conference. . . . We're doing [a] community engagement domain, which means we're working with the board we've put together and possibly [have] been in conversation with the Smithsonian to do a traveling exhibit. But also [we're trying] to do workshops for community people who've already been recorded by us to learn how to use the equipment and the metadata and then do their own recordings. So, it's response recordings to what we've done. So, lots of fires, lots of excitement all over the place. But the big excitement last week is that this website, this platform that we've been working on for basically five years, has finally launched. So, super exciting for us.

Chambliss: One of the things that was really interesting about looking through the project website is it says you aim to offer new resources for documenting [and] interpreting [the] diversity of American religious life by attending to its various sonic cultures. I thought [that] was really interesting because, of course, in the US, I don't think people necessarily think about—this is going to sound bad but bear with me—the question about religious diversity because it's a primarily Christian nation in many ways, one of the most Christian nations in the modern world. And in terms of religiosity, adherence to religion, a lot of our public narrative doesn't

necessarily always reflect the great diversity we know exists in the United States in terms of religion for a variety of reasons. Some of [them] political, some of [them] just around privacy, right?

Sound is actually a really intriguing way to reach out to people that kind of resonates, no pun intended. And so, when you're on the site, you do see a variety of different snapshots that are sonic in nature, but they're not just all songs. When I first heard the name I was like, "Oh it must all be songs," but they're not all songs. And I want you to talk a little about your logic around how you approach this idea of sonic culture because that's actually probably one of the great nuances of the project and a lot of people would miss it if they just heard the name.

DeRogatis: Right. And thanks for that question because that really does get to the heart of the project. So, there is an answer about engaging the larger public and then there's an answer about interrogating categories amongst scholars in the study of religion. Clearly, the more interesting question is about engaging the public. Most people, when we came to them and said, "Would you like to be part of our project? We'd like to record," if they are connected to what we think of as traditional religious communities, they would think immediately of what we might think of as a canonical religious sound. And almost always they think it's music. Let's listen to the choir. So, we've been very intentionally broad in our thinking of what constitutes sound for some scholarly reasons

but also playful reasons, and to allow people to rethink their assumptions pretty quickly.

We are very interested in what communities think of as their main sound. But also, we're interested in our own categories. Maybe not necessarily representational sound, but often we're thinking about the sounds of everyday lived practices. So, the chatter and sound of coffee cups at a coffee hour after church instead of a sermon. Or the ambient sounds of the frying at a [Langar] during food at a [gurdwara]. Or, perhaps, a religious group marching down the streets for Black Lives Matters. Just sounds that make you say, "Huh," and think a little bit more about what counts as religious sound. We also are very interested in the way in which sound allows religious beliefs and practices to travel. So, to travel in spaces beyond maybe a traditional mosque or synagogue or temple. Maybe it can go out onto the street, or that sound allows encounters.

Really thinking a lot about basic things, about what is it we think about when we think about religion and how can we think more broadly if we pay attention to sound? And with sound traveling, where are those spaces that it moves into where people can come together and interact or learn new things? We've had all kinds of really fun ideas, especially from our undergraduates. Like, one of my researchers a few years ago got really interested in following the Granger garbage truck around because it has scripture on the back of it. And just recording, you may not know that, but you'll notice it now when you see the garbage collection [and hear the] recording

[of] this truck [and] the sounds of the truck picking up garbage. But [now you will see it] with the knowledge that it's broadcasting religion, [that] there's scripture painting on it.

We think about sounds from intentionally religious communities. You can identify a group that says we're a religious community and here are some of our sounds, but also sounds that are the content [of] religion, right? So, we have a group of sounds that are outside the Republican convention, the last national Republican convention for the presidential election. And we have people who are on the street either from a religious perspective protesting, or part of their protest is about religious content. [For] anyone who stumbles across our website, we want them to sort of think more capaciously about what counts as religious sound. And how do you know it when you hear it? What do you think about from the scholarly perspective? Isaac and I are issuing a call to our colleagues to say, if we want to learn something about religious diversity in the United States, we have to move beyond the traditional methods of text or buildings or the scholarly categories we're used to associating with thinking and defining and analyzing religion. Sound is one of those ways of not just [getting] at thinking about what counts as religion, but also it gives us a way to get into everyday practices [that] people actually do.

Chambliss: One of the things I'm [also] really interested [in] about this project, I think, is that it's a really great example of a digital humanities project in the sense that I think you're achieving something with the platform you could not do

purely with paper. Not to say that either you or Isaac are against paper, I'm not suggesting that. If you're going to send me an evil email, a hateful message, that's not what I'm saying. Part of the goal, I think, with Digital Humanities is to achieve things that you cannot achieve in traditional form; not to replace it, but to supplement those arguments. It gets me to this question I like to ask everybody who comes on the podcast this season and that's: how do you define Digital Humanities?

DeRogatis: Right. Thanks. Well, that's easy to define. There's a question I've never heard.

Chambliss: Everyone's answer is different and it's all right.

DeRogatis: There we go. I want to answer your question, but before I do that, I would love to just reiterate that, thank you for noticing that because I think that that is the key, right? That we can write about sound, but this gives people the ability to listen. You have to have the platform for people to actually listen and make decisions for themselves. And, in our case, they can do all kinds of things with those sounds and find the things they want to find or the user can look around the way they want to use the sounds in the site.

The first time I heard people talking about Digital Humanities was not that long ago, [it was] maybe six or seven years ago. And I remember not knowing what that meant at all and having some weird assumptions. And I have a really vivid memory of talking to the person we hired at MSU to be the Digital Humanities librarian. And this person's name is [Bobby Smiley] and he now works at Vanderbilt. But when

he came to Michigan State, he had done a master's in religious studies at Yale before he did his library science degree. And a friend of mine who had taught him, said, "Oh, this person's coming. He's great. You've got to talk to him." And so, I felt like he was a safe person. At our first meeting, I just said, "Could you just tell me what Digital Humanities is? Because I don't know and I feel like I should know by now." And what he said to me…I mean, he's just such a wonderful colleague and did work on our HWW project.

And what he said to me was, "Digital humanities is the use of computational methods to ask new questions about the humanities." And I remember saying, "Well, what if I don't know what computational methods are?" He said, "Well then, you might be learning about that, but always think to yourself, what kinds of new questions can we ask if we have these tools? Where will that go?" So that's always been in the back of my mind. And in fairness to Bobby, I'm sure he said it in a much more sophisticated way, but that was the takeaway I got from it.

Chambliss: I think that's a very common answer, right? But it does bring me to another question because the complication with Digital Humanities is that a lot of the work is hidden and there's a lot of work involved.

DeRogatis: 100%. . . . How can we use digital technology to ask new humanities questions and also experience the humanities in a new way? Both of those things. Well, to do that, I don't have that skill set to do the technology or the

archiving or the graphic design. And so, for me, it's bigger than just the new questions. That's where you start from. But my experience of Digital Humanities is that it's wildly collaborative. That you have to find ways of communicating with people across lots of different skillsets to come together and produce something that's meaningful. And that takes a tremendous amount of time and work and trust.

With our team, it's not just scholars, community members, undergraduates, [and] graduate students. We're dealing with technical people and application development with a graphic designer, with [a] multimedia producer, with digital librarians. We're just about to hire a digital archivist. And none of this can happen without everybody on board [and] everybody being respected for what they bring to the project and being acknowledged and trusted. And so, it's a very much a process-oriented endeavor. There's lots of conversation about who's doing what and when and how can they feel fully included and respected, and who represents this, or who speaks for us. I mean, today, I'm talking to you [and] I am one person in a crowd of many, and you'll notice I'm trying to mention people by name, even those who were part of the project many years ago, like Bobby Smiley.

It's not just about the use of digital technology to ask new humanities questions or experience the humanities in new ways. For me, it's also a fully collaborative endeavor. In our case, and I think in many cases, it is a public-facing endeavor. Not all, but there is often, at least for us—because so much

of our data and our research is in community—we involve community partners. And so that's very different than sitting in, for me at least, a library and writing a book solo. Because I haven't done ethnography. I've been more textual in my writing. [But] this is based in the community. Then you must ask the community, what would you like from this project? You can't just be extractive. So, collaborative [and] public-facing are the two other things I add to these new questions [and] to the humanities. But I realize that is not the case for all digital projects and I am speaking for myself on behalf of our project that there may be individuals involved in our project who may say, "Oh, I see it just a little bit differently than that."

Chambliss: Right, yeah. And I think that's also one of the things that's very classic Digital Humanities, a collaborative process. [It's] one of the things about it that makes it complicated in humanities because a lot of the acknowledgement and benchmarks and accolades are designed to [be] given to a person, not a team.

DeRogatis: Exactly. Or the work that goes into building a team, [like] creating a trust and allowing for people to do their thing as part of the project; that labor gets unacknowledged. It's much more like working in a lab in the sciences than it is writing a book in the humanities. And so, it's very hard to catch up with that on the humanities side.

Chambliss: Another thing about this project I want to acknowledge is the important work you've done with undergrads and grads [regarding] research. . . . When you go

through the site, you can see names of people who've done recordings and you have a little write ups. Some of it was done by you, but some of them I think by the students, [which] made the recording really reflect a hands-on experience for undergrads. I do that same thing in my class and it's always interesting because you have to explain to undergrads—at least, I always try to explain it to undergrads—these are the skills you are acquiring while you're doing this project. Even though all you did was maybe record something or took a picture, because you had to put it into a database, you had to make metadata. There're these things that you've done but you don't think of them. This is how the Internet actually works.

DeRogatis: Yeah. When I integrated this, I taught a seminar early on called Religion and the Senses. And [in] the classroom, we were doing content; but many of the sessions in the classroom were what people would think of as technical, [like] learning how to use the audio recorder, thinking about metadata categories, learning how to, at that time, use Omeka. That's not the platform we use [now], but it was at that time. And then reminding them that, when you write your resume, these are skills that you have.

Yeah, incorporating undergraduates is extremely important for me and also for Isaac, obviously my department is an undergraduate-only department. So, we're always involved in finding ways to bring undergraduates into our research. I moved pretty quickly from having it as a classroom-base to,

once we were able to afford it, paying undergraduate researchers. Having a team and having that outside-of-the-classroom experience became a little bit more workable. But I agree with you, it's really important to name these skillsets as they're being acquired.

Chambliss: And with the project reaching this huge milestone again, there's always this question of the work being hidden and this is, in some ways, when you look at it, not to over blow this, but there's real success benchmarks in the narrative of this project. It had a big grant. You had a lot of cross-campus collaborative partnerships and foundational support. I mean, these are things [that], if you were writing up your tenure promotion packet, you'd be like, "wah, wah, wah," because it's a digital project and projects just don't fit anywhere. I mean a lot of tenure and promotion guidelines don't necessarily define things very clearly [for] digital.

DeRogatis: Absolutely. I agree 100% on that.

Chambliss: I do encourage people to go to the interface. You have a really good interface because there's an archive. You click "archive" [and] you just see the files.

DeRogatis: Project history.

Chambliss: Yeah, you get a project history. But you hit "map," [and] you see the files on a map. So, you can see you and Isaac are working a kind of geographic area around you. But also, on the site, as you mentioned, there's [these] grants you have available and I get the impression [from] looking at the site [that] the future of this is that this whole map is going

to fill up and you're going to get people from all across the country out and about recording, adding to the database, so we get this full measure of the American sonic culture.

DeRogatis: Right. And it's not crowdsourcing though, because we want to make sure that we keep… On the site, we also have our statement of ethics and we have metadata categories. And we want to help people. We want to provide the equipment. So, we're all using the same recorders. But one of the guiding principles we followed is that we want to record in our own communities. As we go out, I'm not going to send out MSU researchers to Oklahoma to do recording. We want someone in Oklahoma to say, "Hey, I've got a reason for wanting to do some recordings, can I partner with you?" We want to expand geographically but always have people working in community. That's very important to us. And then you will see that the map will expand, expand, expand.

It is the case that, when you know your community well, you have access to people who might be not as willing to be recorded. But you also know when they say, "No, I don't want to be part of this," that I think you're more likely to respect that because you're living with them. Just because there aren't examples of some religious communities around mid-Michigan doesn't mean they don't exist, right? This has been null factor in the archive. And it doesn't mean they haven't been reached out to. It means a choice has been made not to participate, and [that] there are really good reasons not to participate. And then there are some reasons like we just don't

feel like it. But I think [building] that kind of deep knowledge and respect and to continue to live in community together makes me more comfortable that we can follow [the] ethical guidelines that we've put together. So, yes; expand, expand, expand, but always coming out of the communities in which people are recording.

Chambliss: And when you think about this process of adhering to your ethical framework and reaching out to people, how long do you foresee the project continuing? This is just you, you're not speaking for everybody, it's just you because I can see this project going on for a while. It's been going on for a while, going on for a good long time. Do you have a sense of, "Okay, the next five years we're going to be doing this. The next decade we're going to be doing this"? Or [maybe] you don't want to even think about the end yet. How much longer can this go on?

DeRogatis: Right. That's actually always the conversation, especially when it's time to do another grant. And it's primarily between me and my co-director, but we always try to include everyone after we've thought through where we're going. I'm just going to speak for myself, that my goal is that, by the time we get to the end of this funding cycle or close to it, we've been able to identify people who are part of our growing advisory boards. So, we have advisory boards around community engagement, we have an overall advisory board, [and] we have [an] interpretive scholarship advisory board. We've got a bunch. And I'm hoping some of these people, or

maybe other people who come into the project, might be in a place where they'd be ready to become a co-director. And so, that wouldn't mean I would leave, but I would like to see an exit plan for co-directing.

I think it really works to have co-directors. That being said, one of the things from this final grant, this most recent grant from Luce, allowed us to hire a fulltime position for [a] project manager at OSU and then a full time position for a digital archivist at MSU. This digital archivist will be working 50% of their time on our project because we're moving the archive to the Vinson Voice Library at Michigan State University. The sound archive is going to live at MSU and, just like a rare book room, there'll be procedures for if you want to come here and listen. There are some recordings you'll have full access [to], some are partial access, [etc.].

The archivists will also be 50% Digital Humanities and, eventually, we'll be 100% Digital Humanities once we get through bringing the archive over. Even if I'm not co-director in a few years, the sound archive will be here at MSU. I'm always going to have a hand in it. We've got a lot of people across the country who are really passionate about this project and are serving [as] advisory board members or hoping to be part of the geographical expansion. There lots of people who have interacted with us and my hope is that, over the next couple of years, some of them will be in a position to say, "I'd like to co-direct." And it can maybe move to another region. Maybe working with Isaac, maybe not. I don't know.

Chambliss: Okay. Well thanks for taking the time to talk with me about this project, I really appreciate it.

DeRogatis: Thank you.

Chambliss: If people want to follow up with you, do you have a website?

DeRogatis: There's the project website [and] you can follow us on Twitter [@ReligiousSounds]. And we also, on our website, have a contact form. That's a really good place to get in touch with us. But [I'm] happy to field any questions, suggestions. One thing we didn't talk about [is] that, besides the archive and the visualizations, we have one other part of our website, which are audio essays that are highly curated by our multimedia producer, Lauren Pond. And that's another way to engage, rather than searching through an archive to just see how somebody would put together the audio based around themes or maybe a specific location. I also want to encourage people to go to that part, too. You just click under the gallery tag at the top of the website.

BROOKS HEFNER AND CIRCULATING AMERICAN MAGAZINES

"...it is not just having the numbers, but the kinds of stories that the numbers can tell...how do we understand? And in some ways it goes back to that very first question that I had, which was, so what about Dashiell Hammett and Black Mask."

Brooks Hefner

I spoke with Dr. Brooks Hefner, Professor of English and Director of Graduate Studies at James Madison University, for *Reframing History* because of the fundamental way his digital humanities research offers the opportunity to know more about American culture. Hefner, along with Ed Timke, received a National Endowment for the Humanities Digital Advancement Grant for Circulating American Magazines, a data visualization project designed to make 100 years of circulation figures for major American periodicals publicly accessible. In our conversation, we spoke about the origins of the project and how he sees his digital humanities practice as

means to expand scholarship, engage students, and reach out to the public.

Keywords

Visualization, Publishing, Pulp Magazines, Comics, American Popular Culture

The Conversation

Chambliss: Hi, my name is Julian Chambliss and you're here for another episode of *Reframing history*. Today I'm talking with Brooks Hefner, who is a professor at James Madison University. [He] is also the director of graduate studies and an author. His book *Word on the Streets: American Language of Vernacular Modernism* came out in 2007. The reason he's on *Reframing History* [has] lots to do with a digital project he's doing right now called Circulating American Magazines, which is a data visualization project designed to make over a hundred years circulation figures for major American periodicals publicly available. To me, this was an ideal project [for talking] about these questions of creating public knowledge and, I think importantly, [the] hidden labor associated with Digital Humanities. Brooks, thanks for taking the time to talk to me today for the podcast.

Hefner: Thanks for having me.

Chambliss: Could you give people a little bit on your background? Where'd you get your degree? How [did] you

come to James Madison and how [did] you hit upon this very interesting digital project?

Hefner: I did my PhD in English at the CUNY graduate center in New York city. And my dissertation, which ultimately evolved into that book you mentioned, was really about looking at popular forms of publication and giving writers that are often below the line when we think about literary production a little bit of credit and beginning to kind of contextualize experimentation. What that led me to really do is think about the practices of publication for popular writers a lot. And it got me really interested in periodical studies, which is one way magazine history is framed, especially within the discipline of English.

I took the job at James Madison after I finished my degree in 2009 and [I've] been there ever since. In the process of working on revising the dissertation toward a book publication, one of the things I got interested in was essentially debates between writers and editors about the success or failure of a given magazine. And I can trace a lot of this back to reading some letters between Erle Stanley Gardner (the detective writer who created Perry Mason and began his career writing for pulp magazines and as an editor) and a couple of editors with a magazine called *Black Mask*, which was one of the really famous pulp magazines. You know, we're [talking where] Dashiell Hammett [and] Raymond Chandler got published first.

And so, Gardner really didn't like Hammett. He thought

he was too artsy. And he wrote to the editor saying, "I'm sure every time you publish Hammett the magazine's circulation drops." And it was interesting because it was a window into the mind of writers, especially popular writers thinking about how their work might influence the circulation of a given magazine. And there's some other stuff about this particular magazine you'll sometimes see where people [like] historians will kind of throw off these lines about, "Oh, well, when this guy's name appeared on the cover, circulation jumped 20%," or whatever. One of the things I realized is that there's really, for most people, no way to verify any of these claims.

Chambliss: This is an important point. When a lot of historians talk about print culture in this period, we know publications are popular, but we're often just estimating the numbers.

Hefner: Exactly. And a lot of times, if you get numbers, you're getting them really processed, right? You might get an average at the time that the magazine was at its peak or you might just be getting one number that represents the highest circulation [of] a magazine number. Or you might get an editor making something up in a memoir in order to inflate his own ego and legacy. Or you might even get a magazine editor who's trying to reimagine his magazine or her magazine as a more coterie publication and deflating the numbers.

Chambliss: This is one of the things that occurred to me when I saw the initial announcement for your project. When I think about these characters, because I often think about

pulp publications [as a] precursor to comic books, the authors
I strongly associate with a character format that will become a
superhero character like, say, Tarzan or a character like Conan,
Doc Savage, or the Spider. They all appear in these magazines
and, while I don't usually say, "this character sold this
magazine," it's the selling of the magazine in total that taps
into this popular element. This is a popular magazine. I know
that it sells a lot, but the reality is, do I know for a fact when
Robert E. Howard is Conan is appearing in *Weird Tales* or
some magazine like that? It feels more than say, Kull, who
was regarded by scholars of Howard not as popular character.
Conan is popular because his popularity really kicks in later
as a paperback property. What you're talking about is crucial
to how we formulate a narrative of publication history for
popular characters. And that's why it's really interesting to see
that you're using these digital humanities tools to really answer
this fundamental question.

Hefner: Yeah, I mean, so here's kind of how this unfolded.
When I started asking these questions, I came across a
reference to a really pretty obscure volume in the Library of
Congress. And I believe the reference was in the work of David
Earle, *Re-covering Modernism*. It was a great book on the
pulps. It talks about the way modernism gets repurposed as
a kind of pulp phenomenon. And it was a kind of offhand
reference to something that seemed really mysterious,
something called an ABC Blue Book. I went on WorldCat
looking [up] this ABC Blue Book, [like] what would it be?

And I've discovered that, essentially, it only existed as far as I could tell at the Library of Congress. Fortunately, I live a couple of hours from the library Congress and I can go in and do research visits there pretty easily. I set up a research visit and I believe this was in 2010.

I found these really thick [things], they were blue on the outside, [these] bound volumes [that were] collected publishers' reports submitted to an organization called the Audit Bureau of Circulations. The Audit Bureau of Circulations was created in 1914 by advertisers who really felt they were getting ripped off because magazines could claim they had any number of readers. [So], this Audit Bureau was created [and] you had advertisers who were members and could receive the information. And you had magazines who were members, who could have their numbers essentially audited and proofed by The Audit Bureau. It meant advertisers could trust these numbers and therefore advertising rates could be a little bit more standardize. I find these volumes and, initially, I'm trying to answer this one very simple question, right? Was the presence of Dashiell Hammett, did it correlate with better circulation or not?

I thought it's [got to be] pretty simple to find the answer to this question. And the answer is Erle Stanley Gardner was dead wrong. The serialization of the *Maltese Falcon* in *Black Mask* was the highest circulation that magazine ever had in 1929. It also happened at a moment in which the magazine industry was expanding really wildly. So, you had a lot more readers and

it was right before the stock market crash, [when] the magazine industry took a huge hit. You can't necessarily make a one-to-one causation argument. You can definitely see a correlation.

But what I also discovered in these reports is that, not only did they give figures certified (not audited) and sworn by the publisher for every issue of the magazine that was published, but they also would take a single issue and give a breakdown geographically by state of newsstands, sales, and subscriptions. These reports were issued twice a year. That means for every year, you have maybe a spring and a fall issue that's used to give [to] advertisers. They were the intended audience for these numbers, a snapshot of where people were reading the magazine. Were they reading it in middle America or were they reading it on the coast? How many subscriptions were there? How many a newsstand sales were there? And it took me a little while after initially encountering this in 2010 too really wrap my head around what a wealth of information this was because the volumes [are] at the Library of Congress. The earliest volume is from 1924 and the latest volume is from 1972. This is really for people who study magazines. I mean this is the golden age of American magazines. This is the *Saturday Evening Post*, *Life*, and *Look*. This is all that stuff.

Chambliss: For those magazines, are they breaking them out in terms of…I'm thinking of some lifestyle magazines for African Americans that came out in that era. All titles, including the African American publisher or a more

specialized audience because there are, of course, ethnic-themed magazines as well, or hobbyists or specialized.

Hefner: It's interesting because it was a kind of opt-in. If you're a magazine and you want to attract advertisers, you would seek to become a member of the ABC (Audit Bureau of Circulation). Not every magazine is in there, but what's interesting, to your question, is a lot of African-American publications beginning in the 1940s—like *Ebony*, *Jet*, *Jive*, *Bronze Thrills*, *Tan*, and *Sephia*—they're all in there because they were seeking advertisers. They were really aggressively seeking bigger advertisers and attempting to demonstrate the broad consumer base reading their magazine to the advertisers.

Chambliss: Which is an important part of the story, the emergence of the Black consumer audience.

Hefner: Absolutely. It's interesting within; I mean, it's also interesting without. Some magazines you mentioned [like] *Weird Tales* I think was the kind of magazines that started very small. ...I should know this, but I think it [was] initially published in Indianapolis. And they didn't really necessarily feel they needed to join, but when they get bought by the company that publishes short stories, they ended up in the ABC. You see, *Weird Tales* kind of shows up in the late '30s, after Howard's dead and after Lovecraft is dead. But you still see it. And you can still get a sense of where it is vis-à-vis other publications.

There were also publishing combinations where advertising was sold in bulk. So, Street & Smith was one of the earliest

publishing houses. They submitted their circulation numbers by month, as a whole. And they list all the magazines that are within each month. This also is true for comic publishers who were involved in the ABC. Marvel joins I think in '46. We have data from the Marvel comic group beginning in 1946 through '72, and we have data from what is called National Comics. You know, that's the publishing house, I guess the publishing group, but it is essentially DC from around the same time. So again, those are kind of larger numbers and bigger groups, but it's ultimately planning to make all this available and allow interesting visualization. You can take it in [an] interesting direction in terms of comparative analysis.

Chambliss: That brings to the crux of my second concern about talking to you. Of course, this is a digital project, and definitions of Digital Humanities are complicated. But a broad definition is the use of digital tools in the study of humane topics. And you're...explicitly [describing this] as a data visualization project. How are you creating [the] project, or who's working with you? How are you creating a project and what's your approach here in terms of making this public knowledge?

Hefner: Yeah, I sat on this information for a while because I was working on my book and I had an inkling of how massive this was. I was pulling information that was interesting to me for my specific research, but was holding off on doing anything too much with it. And then, a couple of years ago, I participated in a National Endowment for the Humanities

Institute on magazines in New York. And talking to people there really got me thinking more about some of the data I've collected and thinking this actually would be an immensely viable tool for people. I met someone there who was working on audit bureaus. He was a historian of media. I knew there was no way I could do this by myself and that I needed somebody who had a little bit more experience in media history if this was going to get off the ground. I asked him, his name's Ed Timke, and he's now at Duke University, to come on with me as co-director of this and we decided to apply for a National Endowment for the Digital Humanities Advancement grant, which we were fortunate enough to receive last year and [that] covers the two-year period.

We've kind of hit the ground running, but the amount of work is pretty extraordinary. I think that, if I had a better idea of the amount of work earlier on, we might've made this more [of] a four-year project instead of a two-year project. It's a lot and the...work that's involved, I think probably anybody who does digital humanities can tell you, it's just assembling and putting together the data. The majority of our grant request was for money for student labor to put in data. Both Ed and I had been putting in data ourselves. We'd have other people on the main team that had been putting in data. But the majority of it is going to students, who are working through those images of sheets. Ed and I have been to the Library of Congress multiple times. We've been to a couple of other spots. And we've taken, I don't know, 25,000 photos ([as] a low estimate)

of these reports. They're not the kind of thing you can OCR. The data that's in these reports has to be input by hand and so, you have to imagine, okay, we're 50 years roughly with this really intense data that involves 100 data points per magazine twice a year. We're already at probably half a million data points for this project.

Chambliss: Are [the] students [you] are using undergrad students or graduates?

Hefner: We're hiring undergrads to do it.

Chambliss: And you're training them?

Hefner: [Yes], on how to read the sheets. It's pretty easy. And what we've done, I mean, a lot of the work that we're doing, we're actually doing through Google Drive. We have a sheet, an image, and then we have a sheet that's basically set up in the same general organization as the image with auto sums that allow students to check for quality control. And then, students get a batch of these, they work through the batch, they get another batch. It's been pretty much the process for assembling all those, [and] the end goal here is to make all this data downloadable, which is definitely a very important thing for us to have it freely downloadable.

People who are working can play with the data themselves, but we also are working with a developer to build a visualization tool that will allow you, if you're interested in Marvel and you want to see the kind of history of Marvel circulation, you can lay that out on a timeline. If you want to compare Marvel versus DC in terms of state-by-state data,

you can look at a couple of different choropleth maps—heat maps that will show you, "Oh, well, this sold better in the south and this sold better in the Midwest." One of the things I'm excited to do is in the mid '40s because the titles were so popular [is] National Comics, which is what we think of as DC [when they] decided to sell advertising in Batman and Superman separately. We have a couple of years where Batman and Superman are pulled out of the general group and we have actual circulation numbers for about two years' worth of those individually. And I could see people doing very interesting things by putting those side by side and thinking about what sort of regional differences might occur in readership.

Chambliss: Oh, right. Yeah.

Hefner: With those two titles, right? I mean my instinct would be, "Oh, well, Superman, the Heartland, he's gonna circulate more in the country and Batman is the kind of gritty urban thing that would appeal to the coast." But it might in fact be exactly the opposite. We have all that information but, you know, we haven't put it through the visualizations yet.

Chambliss: Yeah. There's so much. Frederic Wertham and anti-communist hysteria around comics, for example.

Hefner: Oh, it is intense. If you look at the numbers for Marvel, even just for a mainstream publisher like Marvel [and] the drop in the '50s. I mean, it plummets and you can really see it in terms of the way the publishers change what they're doing or are impacted by the negative publicity around comics. I think you were talking about contribution to the public or

public knowledge. I think, for me personally, Digital Humanities works best when it works in concert with the traditional humanities—that it's not within an echo chamber. Which, you know, maybe I'm a bad digital humanist for saying this, but I do feel like it was important for me in this project that the project be something people who didn't do digital humanities could access and get something out of.

I began to uncover some of this material and Ed and I started collecting more and more of it. [We realized] "Oh, this title is in here or this title is in here." Thinking about how historians, literary scholars, media historians, media studies scholars, sociologists, and anthropologists might say, "I'm really interested in the history of domesticity in 20th century gender and domesticity. Let's look at *Good Housekeeping* and where can I find reliable information about where people were reading *Good Housekeeping*? I want our project to be that kind of place where somebody can go and say, "Now I have reliable information about how popular *Good Housekeeping* was, where it circulated more, where it circulated less." That kind of information, I think, [makes it] pretty easy to make the leap from being in the digital world to being really valuable evidence in the production of scholarship and scholarly arguments.

Chambliss: Right, you said so much there because I agree with you that one of the things that defines effective digital projects is this ability for it to amplify and clarify questions that we already are talking about or [something] we've said in

the historical debate. This project, in particular, is so amazing to me because, when I talk about the impact of a Black character in comics, a lot of that is a qualitative argument. We're making the argument that the first appearance of something matters. But then, over time, we often argue that these publishers are seeking out this sort of untapped market. Is a character like Black Panther, when he's added to the Avengers after his first seminal appearance in the Fantastic Four, is there a change in sales? Is there a possibility that we can see, as the roster of characters at a particular company becomes more diverse, their sales transform? This is a way for us to do that beyond how we usually do it, which is we make a kind of qualitative argument or we use the letter page and react to it in newspapers or letter pages or in fan publications. And the other benefit here, of course, is that, because it's numbers, it seems so much more compelling to people. He'd counted them!

Hefner: Absolutely. Right. I think that, for me, the end here is not just having the numbers, but the kinds of stories the numbers can tell just exactly like what you're saying. How do we understand? And in some ways, it goes back to that very first question that I had, which was, so what about Dashiell Hammett and *Black Mask*? This is exactly the same kind of thing you're saying with Black Panther. What does it mean for this writer to appear? What does it mean for this writer's name to appear on the cover? One thing we found out very quickly was that, in fact, when Tarzan appeared in *Blue Book*

Magazine in the 1920s, circulation was higher than when he didn't appear.

I think one of the other things that that's really intriguing for me as someone who works in the early 20th century is that, when you have a massive amount of information like this, you start to see certain kinds of patterns that make you ask better questions. And I can give you a really good example. When we started putting in the data for issues, it was really intriguing. I kept saying, "Oh, well, how is this that every magazine, whether it's the bestselling magazine in the country or a kind of bottom feeding of pulp magazine that's not doing particularly well, always has better circulation in the winter; [like] peaks in the winter and bottoms out in the summer?" And I'd never seen any scholars really talk about this [or] think about this, the kind of seasonal quality of magazines. And of course, I mean, the kind of sloppy answer for me is, well, yeah, in the summer, people have more to do. They can be outside. In the winter, people are more likely to buy magazines and sit inside and read cause the weather's bad. Right? Right. But beyond that, what does this mean for an editor? If you're an editor and you know you have something that's going to appeal to more people, you're going to put it on the cover. It's going to attract more people because it's a really good piece of writing, because it's a really sensational story because it's already gotten buzzed somewhere else. Do you run it as soon as you get it or do you strategically put it [out] in the winter

or in the summer? I think editors are making choices about the bottom line in a lot of cases.

And so, when you begin to see these larger patterns, I think it allows you to say, "Oh, well, maybe this is why they always publish this guy in the summer when they only had their core readership, but they published this other guy in the winter when they thought they might attract new readers and get some cross over readership. Or vice versa." Maybe we published the crossover guy in the summer to try to flatten readership out so that we don't have really lean summer months. But I think those kinds of judgments are taking the numbers, identifying the patterns, and then moving with it. Right? Moving into the realm of argumentation. And, to a certain degree, speculation. But I think it's nice to have things to speculate on because I think it helps us explain the big picture on popular publishing and that's ultimately the goal of the project.

Chambliss: That goal is broadening our public understanding of the history of print culture in the US is important, especially as digital culture seems to be really putting pressure on the print medium. You're at a teaching institution. Is this something you're using in the classroom as a teaching tool? Are you envisioning incorporating that into the final website to allow people to submit lesson plans or think about how they employ it in the classroom?

Hefner: I certainly hope so. I certainly hope that once word is out about the project [what] we're trying to do is to promote

it in any way we can. Our hope is that people will begin to develop assignments around it. I mean, there are a lot of people in English, for example, who are working in periodical studies who, I think, seem interested in using this. [They're interested in] some of the stories I'm talking about, but also [in discovering] other stories about some of these major locations [like] the *New Yorker*, for example, is in there from virtually its inception. *Esquire*, especially in the 1930s and '40s, published the biggest names in American literary history. We definitely want to get the word out there.

I teach a couple of different courses where this is probably going to play a role. One is a graduate course on modernist magazines, both high and low. Having this data could allow students to do projects on individual magazines [and] gives them yet another resource to draw on to tell the stories of these particular publications. I also teach a course on pulp magazines and there are a lot of pulp magazines. They wanted advertisers, most of the pulp magazines especially [and] the ones that lasted more than a few issues are in there. You've got multiple large publishing combinations, not just Street & Smith, but Munsey Popular Publications, Thrilling Publications, these big publishers. [It] gives you a real sense of how vast the pulp readership was. We can do things like pick the population of a state and correlate it with the number of a certain publisher in there and say, "Wow, there's one magazine from this publisher for every 15 people in Nevada or

something this year." And you just think how it allows you to really see the pervasiveness of this magazine or that magazine.

I think of this project as a labor of love and it's a lot of labor, but it's the project I'm most interested in [and] what other people do with what we put out there. Which is why we want to make all the data downloadable and why we want the visualization. I don't want to own this data in a particular kind of way. I'm excited to see what other scholars, students, [and] teachers decide is really valuable about those and what they can make of it. Because there are so many of these little pieces that you notice as you're moving through. [Like], here's a spike, what's up with that? Here's when this magazine begins to fail, what's up with that? There so many of those little stories that I think could generate great scholarship [and] great assignments, so I'm certainly hoping it gets used in the classroom. We want it to be pretty user friendly and intuitive on the ultimate website. It'll probably be ready later this year, so I certainly hope it will be useful.

Chambliss: That's a great place to stop. I want to thank you so much for taking the time to talk to me about your project.

Hefner: Thank you, Julian.

Chambliss: It's my pleasure. This will be a great conversation for my students, who I'm planning to have listen. But I also will make sure that, when we publish this episode, I will put a link to your site. Hopefully people will find it because I'm excited about getting a chance to use it.

ROBERT CASSANELLO AND A DIGITAL PUBLIC HISTORY

"...so there were a few questions that came out of that class directly related to the practice of digital public history. One was the idea or whether an exhibit can exist in podcast form. So our idea was to say... let's take these objects, repurpose them, put them into a podcast form and see the ways in which that represents the practice of public history.

Robert Cassanello

Dr. Robert Cassanello is an Associate Professor of History at the University of Central Florida. He describes himself as a "social historian interested in public history." He has published several books including *To Render Invisible: Jim Crow and Public Life in New South Jacksonville* (2013) *Migration and the Transformation of the Southern Workplace since 1945* with Colin J. Davis (2010) and *Florida's Working-Class Past: Current Perspectives on Labor, Race, and Gender from Spanish Florida to the New Immigration* with Melanie Shell-Weiss (2011). As a curator, he has designed exhibitions such as *The Long History of the Civil Rights Movement in*

Florida and *From Kin to Kant: Turpentine Culture in Central Florida*. He has also produced numerous media projects such as the films *The Committee* and *Filthy Dreamers* with his UCF colleague Dr. Lisa Mills.

Beyond these accomplishments, I talked with Cassanello because of his engagement with podcasts. While podcasts are widely produced and consumed, their place in the Digital Humanities landscape is not clear. Are they digital humanities projects or media projects? This question looms large as the push for greater "public engagement" is weighed against the time and resources necessary to produce these projects. Cassanello's *A History of Central Florida Podcast*, a 50-episode series, captures Cassanello's vision for a digital public history and, in doing so, pushes us to consider how podcasting might fit within the digital landscape.

Keywords

Podcast, Media, Social History, Material Culture, Public History

The Conversation

Chambliss: So, Robert Cassanello, thank you for joining me.

Cassanello: Thank you for hosting me. I shouldn't say thank you for hosting me. Thank you for having me. You're the host.

Chambliss: Thanks for making the time for this recording.

I'm going to start with us [how I start] with everybody. How do you define Digital Humanities?

Cassanello: Well, really broadly for a variety of reasons. In the broadest sense and as a historian, I always like to look at the long durée, and I use that tongue-in-cheek, not literally. But, [when] you think about the digital and the digital age, this is really the moment for people who were contemporaries to the printing press in some sense. The printing press created this accessibility to knowledge and a way of not only preserving knowledge, but [disseminating] knowledge and interpreting knowledge and creating new knowledge that just hadn't been available before the printing press. And I think the digital is analogous to that in some ways, as well as a leap to something different from what we might refer to as an analog or analog way of doing things. In that sense, the Digital Humanities is sort of [in] the employ of some digital method or digital process to interpret or disseminate the humanities. I know there's a lot of different definitions out there, but that's the one I feel comfortable with. Now, for me, as a historian, I gravitate towards Digital History and, specifically, digital public history. If you want [you can] consider it a subfield of the Digital Humanities, digital public history, because I'm really interested in the ways in which you [can] employ the digital within the realm of practicing public history.

Chambliss: I think that's a really interesting answer because, as you well know, people's definition of Digital Humanities varies widely. But as a historian, you are calling

attention to an ideological strand that used to be more prominent in the sense that people like Dan Cohen have taught and used to talk about the specific things historians do when they're doing digital work. I think it does connect to this point you make about public history. And so, sort of following up with that, is there a kind of uniqueness to your digital work as a historian you can see that's distinct from other disciplines doing digital work?

Cassanello: Yeah, I mean, in some very stark ways, I would say I don't drill down into digital, if that makes sense. I'm more on the surface level and digital is just a means to do something I couldn't do without the digital. And what I mean by that is, for me, as a practitioner of public history, the digital affords me essentially a global stage, right? So, I've been really concerned in my own work with ways to reach global audiences I wouldn't have access to in the 1980s and maybe through most of the 1990s. So, that's sort of the ground I'm trying to plow in the public Digital History realm.

Chambliss: Okay, that's an important point because I think it sets up my next question. One of the reasons I wanted to talk with you is because I really admire your work as a podcaster. I would freely admit that some of the things you've done with podcasts really inspired my own engagement with podcasts and what I think of as your signature project, whether or not you think of it that way...is *The History of Central Florida Podcast*, which is a 50[-episode] podcast series that, I think, was innovative in a number of ways because it used local

artifacts across a number of cultural institutions to tell local history, Florida history, but also [to] really tell a kind of global story. And I'd really like you to talk a bit about the origin of that project and how that project captures your thinking about digital public history and your work as a historian.

Cassanello: Well, first, I would dispute that it captured local history because our intent was never to capture local history. And so, I would kind of put that aside. However, that project, *The History of Central Florida Podcast* project, was something I designed with about 10 graduate students in a podcasting class. There were a few questions that came out of that class directly related to the practice of digital public history. One was the idea of whether an exhibit can exist in podcast form. Right? And that's a really kind of [a] simple question. Can you take the principles of curatorial practices [with a podcast]? Each episode is based on one or more objects from museums in central Florida where the local comes in. Our idea was to say, "Okay, let's take these objects, repurpose them, put them into a podcast form, and see the ways that represents the practice of public history."

And, of course, it couldn't be done without the digital, right? I couldn't have done this project in 1980 because there wasn't access to the Internet in that way or [to] any of these other things. The second, which is what you kind of highlighted in your question, was whether we could create global stories. One of the things I impressed upon the students in this kind of production sense was to say, "Okay, you're

going to write scripts. You're going to interpret material culture. You're going to have to find a narrative for your stories. And I don't want any [of] that dependent upon local history. I said this in class, "I want someone who's in Portland, Oregon to be able to check out your episode and not have to know anything or be connected at all to central Florida."

It has to have a central human story. You know, that it's sort of transnational in that way. I even expanded that to say someone in Tokyo should be able to watch your podcast and not feel this is local history. That was a challenge I placed upon the students. I think they've done it extraordinary [in] succeeding with that project. We worked on a project from 2012 until the summer of 2015. We finished it and posted them all. The easy part of the question to answer was the digital public history question because, obviously, if we successfully created the podcast and people liked it, then we were able to produce a public history project [in] podcast form. That was really simple.

But the global part was much harder to test. And what we did in 2015. This was actually kind of a fluke because two weeks after we finished production, iTunes went down for, I think, three months and only 20 of the 50 episodes were available. That kind of frustrated me. What I did is I posted all of the episodes onto a webpage housed at the UCF library where I am, the University of Central Florida. The library had a subscription to this kind of digital commons site that [is] pretty common now with university libraries. I was the first to

put anything up there really. And we put the 50 episodes up there, curated it on its own page so at least it was accessible. If someone did a Google search for a history of central Florida podcasts, all 50 episodes would appear there while they weren't [on] iTunes and, obviously, we left them up there for the past, you know, five plus years and they're still currently up there today.

What that gave us was analytics. And what I learned—I actually just looked at the data last week—[was] there's almost 2,000 podcast downloads on that website and that's just on that website. That's not counting iTunes or the other places where it exists. It's in all the different podcasts catchers. It's [on this place] called the [Showcase of Text, Archives, Research & Scholarship](#) (STARS), it's just on a STARS website, so people are going to STARS just to download the website. Of those users, there's almost 2,000, like 1,900, I think a little bit over that. And a little 1,000 of them are coming from the United States. Most of them not from Florida, interestingly enough. But outside of that thousand, the 900+ are all over the world: China, Russia, Latin America, Africa. People are just consuming it all over the world. We have to assume that to have this, [we have] what in communication parlance is like "a listening public."

We have a global listening public to this podcast intentionally [and] we wanted to create these global stories and subsume the local. And I think this data gives us evidence that we were successful in that. I don't remember the exact

numbers, but I think there was like 200 plus downloads in China in a few of their cities. And now, you got to think, well, people in China are listening to this, then they must be getting something from it. And I can tell each user is listening to multiple episodes. It's not like a user listens to one episode and then leaves. But you know, on average, they're listening not to all 50, but you know, anywhere from 10 to 15 is what I'm seeing all around the world.

People are listening to it. People are checking it out and they're not listening to in sequence; they're picking and choosing based on the descriptions. At this moment in time, and this is where we get into the digital humanities part of this project, I'm actually working on an article where I have all the data of the downloads and the locations all the way down to, not necessarily a street level, but a neighborhood level. Like, I could tell you what neighborhood in China downloaded what episodes and I'm going to put them all into a database and then figure out what narratives [and] episodes interested people around the world the most and what parts of the world and things like that. I'm trying to kind of figure out who this listening public is as best I can with the data I have.

Chambliss: That's really interesting because I think in your answer, you touched on what I know is an ideological standpoint, an important point for you that the local history or Florida can be understood in a broader global context of material, cultural contexts, right? And this was, at some level, a goal for this project. And as a digital humanities project,

we talked a lot in this podcast about how to judge a project like a podcast. And, in particular, I think podcasts are really interesting because they have not had the same cache as other kinds of digital humanities projects.

I know this has been something you've been thinking about in the context of review and you're very active with H-Net. You're on the board [of] H-Net or have been on the board of H-Net. I want to ask you about that process as a practitioner, [as] someone who has made podcasts and other media projects and [as] someone who is advocating for some sort of review ideology or review framework, why is that important and where does that fit in terms of the validity of a digital humanities practice for you?

Cassanello: A couple things there [in] what you bring up and I have to kind of do this as a disclosure. I've worked on a variety of podcasts, not just this one. But you had referred to this one [as] what you [called] my seminal work or something like that. I'm agreeing with you, that's how I look at it, too. I'm saying we're in agreement on that. And this represented something very different from other podcast projects I worked on, which is why reviewing it and giving it some kind of academic evaluation was so important for that project. Because, for me, this project represented a new body of knowledge, right? Because, if you break down what we do as scholars, what we do is we produce bodies of knowledge, presumably for good; we produce original bodies of knowledge. So, for me, this podcast project was an original

body of knowledge because those people who work on state local history have this sort of determination to say, "I'm going to break the mold. And I'm going to show how you can do state local history that isn't provincial, that isn't localized so much that it only appeals to the people who are in and around that community." That's what this podcast did, it made a statement and made a thesis.

At the core, there [is] this human story to history that transcends geographic boundaries. For that reason, when we finished this project, this [was] actually a four-year process to get it reviewed by journals and it was positively reviewed in the *Journal of American history* and in *Public Historian*. It took me four years just to get those two reviews and I was exhausted and [stopped] there. But, at the same time, I had started this network called H-Podcast with H-Net, which I was involved in because I really did [see] there [are] academics doing podcasts and they're trying to come to terms with the form, and we need the space to dialogue and exchange ideas and things. And so, that's why I helped create H-Podcast with a few other people. Now, to return to your question about reviews and things. For me, [of] all of the podcasts I've worked on over the years, I only felt that *A History of Central Florida* merited review because the other ones were just sort of interview shows and I was just talking to people.

And, to me, that doesn't necessarily represent new knowledge but it's just kind of like engaging an audience with knowledge. [Maybe] there [is] synthesis, if you want to think

of it in those term, as opposed to production of new knowledge. To me, there are podcast projects that do the very thing that we did with *The History of Central Florida Podcast* that produced new knowledge. And I think those projects were being overlooked, even within the realms of Digital Humanities and Digital Public History and Digital History, to [such] a large extent that people weren't looking at these podcasts [as] projects, and they probably don't represent the bulk or the majority of podcasts that are done by academics. But I think there are these gems that exist that need to be reviewed and considered and placed within the context of other podcast projects and things like that. One of the reasons we are launching a podcast reviews program is to achieve that very goal because, when I finished this *History of Central Florida Podcast*, there was nothing for me to plug into. I felt like this was the equivalent of an article or book that we worked on. And, if someone watched all 50 episodes, there's stuff in there they're not going to get from a JSTOR search or from their library. It's just in that podcast. And the podcast had a thesis and the episodes all work together, it was holistically a piece of original research.

Chambliss: In that formula, you say the podcast has a thesis, what was the thesis?

Cassanello: The thesis was that there was a central human history that can be understood through the production of material culture. Because that was the other part of each episode, too, the material culture part, right? It's like this

global history narrative companion with material culture, and the material culture part we did was based on everyday objects. We weren't looking at presidential objects or governors' objects or politicians' objects, or very rarely did we look at something from the affluent side of things. We really were looking at [it] from a social history perspective. [Like], how do you take something that's an everyday object and how is that a text for you to interpret the lives of people at a place at a point in time and how do you do it that centers it within a sort of common human condition? That was the other thing that was a part of it. And I think that's what the thesis of [the] podcast is. So, presumably, someone who watches most of the episodes or all the episodes could go to their local museum, wherever it may be, even if it's in Beijing, China, and they can employ that same process that they learned from the podcast to the objects they're looking at in their local museums.

Chambliss: This gets at a number of issues around Digital Humanities that [are] worth considering because your sense that this project *History of Central Florida Podcast* created new knowledge was an important one connected to why you thought it needed to be reviewed but then immediately becomes a question. As you say, it was a class that you taught. In that context, there are 50 episodes. It's a massive project, 50 episodes. Are you the editor? Are you the author? Are you the contributor?

Cassanello: I'm the executive producer and the students are episode producers. Now, I also produced episodes. I don't

remember how many, three or four maybe I produced myself because I wanted to give them a template to work with. I think I did…I don't remember which one, but I did a few [early on] just to show them this is how I would do it. And then they worked on their own. And they were producers, they were writers, and they worked on each other's, too. If you think [of it as] a production company as opposed to a class, each episode almost had its own little production company. Students would gravitate towards each other, help each other with scripts and recording [and] things like this. There are very few dedicated roles.

One thing we haven't mentioned is that the podcast series is a video podcast. You actually can see and there's visual cues and things in the podcast. I had one dedicated student who took all the photos of the objects because he was a professional photographer and he worked in that capacity of taking pictures of curated materials behind plexiglass. He had that specific skillset. We didn't know until we were in class and he says, "Oh, I can take all these pictures because I know how to shoot through plexiglass." He was the dedicated photographer and he worked on his own episodes too, but he just had an added role in addition to the episodes he worked on. And then there was another student I trained in the class to do the final editing, the final video editing. He and I shared that role because sometimes I would do final video editing. Sometimes I would give it to him. It wasn't just one person doing it, but I trained him in the software. And then, he quickly got up to my

level of editing, so he and I just worked through all the episodes until the end.

Chambliss: Correct me if I'm wrong, the podcast can be consumed without the video component. Or do you have to have the video component for the podcast to work?

Cassanello: They were written in audio form. The video is just kind of an added thing that accentuates the narrative in a variety of ways.

Chambliss: And, for you, as the executive producer and the person who is setting the intellectual tone as you were doing this project, are all those scripts a part of the STARS site, like the library site? Did you archive all the material related to the project?

Cassanello: I have a master archive of everything. And I've already talked to Special Collections and University of Central Florida and they're going to house the archives for me in case anyone wants to research in it and hear the full interviews we did [or] read the scripts or anything like that. I'm going to set it up in a way that you have to be in the Special Collections to see it. I don't want that stuff disseminated publicly or widely on the Internet, but that stuff eventually will be available if anybody, say someone's researching podcasting and they're interested in that podcast and they wanted to come and see how the mechanics of it work, they'd be able to research in the archive I created for it.

Chambliss: And so, coming out of this as a person who's developing an idea with you—and you say you helped develop

H-Podcast—correct me if I'm wrong, [but] there's a review system you've been researching, like the process of reviews. Is that system set up? Is the review process set up now for these kinds of mediated projects for H-Net?

Cassanello: Yeah. I mean, it's a staff thing. I'm building towards reviewing digital projects with H-Net. The H-Podcast podcast review system is like a trial balloon in the sense of reviewing born digital projects if you want to think about it in those ways. We haven't announced it yet but, in the coming days on H-Podcast, we will be releasing guidelines for reviewing a podcast. We have [the guidelines] already written [and] they've been approved by our advisory board and the VP of Research and Publications. We just haven't made it public yet. We're looking to see how this goes in a year or two and then figure out a way that we can then expand to not only review podcasts, but review other Digital Humanities work and Digital History work that, again, is digitally born and exists only in digital form. It's not a book [or] article form.

Chambliss: Right. Okay. Ultimately, this is about that digital-born intellectual artifact, having a space so it can be reviewed. Because, right now, the only venue that does reviews of DH projects is the *Journal of American History*.

Cassanello: No, there's more now. The *Journal American History* does, *Public Historian* does if it has a public history angle to it. So, they do a lot of websites and things like that that are repositories for items. There's also a new online journal called *Reviews in Digital Humanities*. I think I might not have

the exact title right. But they're doing essentially a journal that looks at a variety of different digital humanities projects within one issue. I'm not sure if they do a thematic. I just saw the first one and there's been at least one podcast review done by an academic publisher in Canada. They essentially did a peer review. Someone worked on a podcast project and this academic publisher essentially did a peer review of it and released the peer review. And the peer review actually had, I think, 12 or 15 people involved, you know, [a] pretty high number. It wasn't just like one or two people who were peer reviewing this podcast. It was quite a variety of people from different fields and they were given a questionnaire. They answered the questionnaire and then the questionnaire was made public. And if anyone's interested in seeing the peer review of this podcast project, they could go to the website and they could read all about it. For that person who produced the podcast, it was, I think, a single producer, she could go to her home institution and say, "Here's the peer review of my podcast. I want to treat it as original scholarship." And she would at least have that, whether her colleagues accepted or not [is] a different thing, but at least she has the document.

Chambliss: Right. I guess that gets at my last question. I know that, in some ways, you've thought a lot about this question of what a digital public humanities practice is and why it is. The why of it, what's the *why* of digital public humanities? I would be interested, having gone through this process with the podcast, having researched the idea of review

through H-Net, what's the value in your opinion of a DH practice for scholars? I think there's a question here about Digital Humanities as a public practice, which I think at some level is one of the ways Digital Humanities has value in academia. It's something that makes things public, but then there's this other element that I think you hint at very directly in the sense that, as a historian who does public history, you see X value, is that fair?

Cassanello: Yeah. I mean, you know, this actually goes back to when I was in graduate school, right. I entered graduate school at the very time of the history culture wars of the early 1990s. The Enola Gay, the Common History Standards, all this stuff that just got historians all up in arms about how the average person, the person on the street, was engaging history. It became this partisan divide early on before partisan America, in some sense. And I remember being in graduate school at that moment when it first started, and I think the lessons we learned initially were wrong. When I was in graduate school, what we were told and how we interpreted those culture wars was that history had become locked in this ivory tower and no longer was engaged with the person on the street. I remember people would pull out Richard Hofstadter, [who] wrote for the academic and also wrote for the person on the street. And the average person on the street would have consumed his books and all this other stuff, and that doesn't happen anymore because we're all esoteric.

And we're all writing [things that are] too theory based, and

postmodernism is turning off the average reader to history and all this other stuff. And these were meant to explain the culture wars, which I don't agree with. I mean, I was indoctrinated in that thinking, so, for a while, I thought that that was true, but I don't believe that anymore. However, one of the things I took away as a lesson was that there's value to engage, to have that Richard Hofstadter, if you want to use that model. I was always had that in the back of my mind.

Now, I went into a grad program that did not have a public history program and I didn't even know the words "public history" when I was a grad student. But I knew I wanted to engage the public. I just didn't know there was a field where you could do that until I got out. Once I got out and went to my first job, which was at Miles College in Birmingham, Alabama, the first day I stepped on campus I said, "How do I engage? How do I meet the public?" And I don't know that I was successful [in] those early years, but it was always kind of like a driving force for me. I always thought it was part of my scholarship and part of who I was and who I am as an academic. That had always been there.

When the digital part came along because of this digital turn or whatever you want to call it, I [didn't] have to engage with [just] my neighbor. I [didn't] have to engage with the museum down the street. I can engage with the world. That changed everything and put things in a place I really never thought [about before]. I wasn't the only one, obviously the Internet had everyone thinking the same thing I was thinking. For me,

it's [driven] me and made me think about my place as a digital public historian in a way I don't think I would have if I was a luddite or if I was born 50 years earlier. Maybe I would have went to my local museum and worked on an in-person exhibit for people in the local community or something like that. That might've been me in the 1950s. But fortunately, I came along during this time [and] was able to harness digital public history in this way.

I'll sort of end this here and there's things I tell students because oftentimes we talk and have conversations about Digital History, digital public history, and things like this. What does it mean to be digital? What is the value of digital? I tell my students, "At some point in time, there won't be any digital historians because we're all going to be digital historians and that is going to be what we are doing and there's going to be no distinction." No one is going to have raise their hand and say I'm a digital historian. It's just going to be second nature. And I see it in myself, quite frankly, because for lack of a better term, I hate to use the word "digital native," because I think it doesn't exist. But I consider myself an analog person or a person immersed in analog because, when I was trained in college, everything was analog. I went to the library and took a book down from the shelf and I looked up how to find a journal article. I didn't go to a database and there's a difference. There's a methodological and investigative difference in having the ease of your research there. I'm working on a book-length project on the right to vote in Florida. And I don't remember

when I first realized this, but it was about maybe a year and a half ago, that all of my research—100% of my primary research—is digital. I got no photocopies. I got no primary resource books I'm consulting. It is 100% all [digital] research. Now, I obviously have books on my bookshelf that are secondary, but all my primary research is in digital form. And it made me think, what does that mean for this project? Because my earlier project on Jacksonville was the opposite, it was all photocopies and printouts. And I have a filing cabinet, [a] four-drawer filing cabinet of my Jacksonville research, filled with all of the research. Yet, my research for this current project is all on a thumb drive, all of it backed up. Don't panic people, there's a backup. And what it made me think about is: how does this ease of research impact me as a scholar now? And I think it does in a variety of ways because it brings the entire collection home to you accessible at any point time.

So, imagine I could go back to Richard Hofstadter, sit in the archives with a legal pad, [and] had to write what he thought he was reading. I can't tell you how many times I looked at a documents months later, years later, and [thought] that's not what I thought it said when I first saw it. So, how does Richard Hofstadter know what he read in certainty off a legal pad? You see what I'm saying? Like, now, all of a sudden, having this stuff on my computer accessible at any time—not only that, but many things [are] word searchable—is making me interpret this material in a way I would not have been able to interpret this material if I wrote this book in 1980.

Chambliss: We all live in the consequences of a digital world, regardless of whether or not we're producing "digital things." Yeah, that's a great place to end it. Thanks so much for taking the time to talk with me about your digital journey, I appreciate it.

Cassanello: Thank you for having me.

LAURIE TAYLOR AND CULTIVATING CARIBBEAN KNOWLEDGE

"Digital humanities is what you do with it. The humanities have always been about the social and cultural in a bigger world. How do we have a better world? Digital humanities is digital scholarship, which is also public scholarship. So, it's how we are public intellectuals in the digital age."

Laurie N. Taylor

In this episode, I spoke with Dr. Laurie N. Taylor. Taylor is the Senior Director for Library Technology and Digital Strategies and Chair of the Digital Partnerships and Strategies Department, as well as Editor-in-Chief of LibraryPress@UF at the University of Florida, George A. Smathers Libraries. She also serves as the Digital Scholarship Director of the [Digital Library of the Caribbean](#) (dLOC). We spoke about the origins of dLOC and the transformative potential of this collaborative project. While it is a project you may not be familiar with, the

ideology and principles at its core are sure to resonate with anyone concerned about the questions of access and power it represents.

Keywords

Caribbean History, Digital Humanities, Library

The Conversation

Chambliss: Laurie, thanks for joining me.

Taylor: Thanks for having me.

Chambliss: I always like to start out these conversations with this very basic question that's super hard but, nonetheless, I'm going to ask anyway. How do you define Digital Humanities?

Taylor: I like some of the easier definitions of Digital Humanities. Digitization is getting at digital form [and] Digital Humanities is what you do with it. The humanities have always been about [the] social, cultural, and a bigger world. How do we have a better world? And there's always the political and social impact of our work. And so, digital humanities work, I would also say, is digital scholarship, which is also public scholarship. It's how we are public intellectuals in the digital age.

Chambliss: That is a pretty good definition. Everyone's got slightly different [ones], so every definition is okay. I would have said this in the introduction but I want to go over it a

little bit more. You're the chair of Digital Partnerships and Strategies at the University of Florida's George A. Smathers Library and you're also the director of the Digital of the Caribbean or dLOC. People might know dLOC, especially people who know digital things. I think of it as like a long-established project. But how long ago did the dLOC start?

Taylor: It started in 2004. It's 15 years old and, for most digital projects, we talk about them having a lifespan that is more like dog years; every year counts for seven years. If [a] project stays around for three years or five years, that is a huge amount of time and impact. dLOC 15? dLOC is super established at this point.

Chambliss: One of the great things about dLOC is, when you start engaging with it, you recognize it operates on multiple levels. One of the things that's really intriguing, I think, when we think about digital humanities projects, is that some of these projects go back to a kind of tool-based perspective. Someone has made something, which I often shorthand as "the Death Star problem." I build the Death Star, I blow up planets. I built this thing, I use this thing, and that's my digital humanities project. How did this thing do this thing? On the other hand, other people are, for lack of a better term, applying digital techniques to a humanities' problems. I think about this in terms of things like distance reading and data visualization. People have a corpus of material, all the Shakespearean people who do analyses of texts and things like that. But the dLOC kind of sits in the middle

of that in a weird way because it's both a tool that people use, but it also increasingly is a space where new knowledge is being created. I'd like you to talk a little bit about dLOC as this sort of evolving digital project that straddles this line between an object that was put together and involves a number of institutions in the Caribbean and also as this thing that generates knowledge about the Caribbean.

Taylor: Yeah, the history of dLOC [is] really awesome for this. [It] was envisioned by Judith Rogers, who's now the retired director of the University of the Virgin Islands Libraries. So, as the director of those libraries, she had libraries on three islands: St .Croix, St. John, [and] St. Thomas. To get to St. John, you're taking a water taxi or a ferry. To get from St. Thomas to St Croix you're flying; you're taking a sea plane or you're taking a commuter plane. That's not a great way to move materials within the Virgin Islands. And then also anywhere in the Caribbean, you have the people who live locally, but the diaspora is worldwide and there are far more people in the diaspora than locally. As she saw the Internet come about in the '90s, she was like, "I think this Internet thing's going to stay and I think we can use this to our advantage." She envisioned how we [would] do this for shared governance and how do we [could] do this to train our people locally to build community and capacity for all of our islands—for all of the Caribbean and for the Caribbean presence in the world.

We have core needs for preservation and access. We're in

hurricane season half a year, always. How do we make sure materials are preserved, [that] they're accessible, [that] they're shared? And there are materials that are defined that we see as important that we're sharing with the world. [It's] not a vendor coming in and cherry picking. [Rather, it's] setting up the format for shared governance, always with the eye towards how does this build community, how does this build capacity? Because one of the things you have is people don't have enough opportunities for training locally and you have people train a librarian and then they leave the Island. A lot of places will talk about [how] we only have four trained librarians on the Island, we only have two trained archivists. How do we build the community across the Caribbean? And then, how do we have all of the additional benefits of this? Setting up the shared governance model with all of the partners, where partners retain all rights to materials, partners select what to digitize and the training, and supporting everyone in doing cross training so that we can do preservation and access of materials. Then working with a scholarly advisory board for what does this mean? What are we doing, how else can we understand this?

And so, early on, a number of literature scholars—Leah Rosenberg has always been a champion on this—said we don't have access to enough early Caribbean literature. And, right now, so much of the canonical understanding is that Caribbean literature begins after independence. It begins with Windrush. And that's not true. There's a lot of Caribbean literature before that, but if we don't have access to it, we

can't tell those stories. [So], let's create some lists and let's start getting access to it and, then, let's actually change the field. And so, we've done that, which changing the field, being able to say that, is really amazing. We have enlarged our understanding of the canon. And now people can teach these materials in their classes. These are written about. It's actually changed the understanding of early Caribbean literature. Then, how do we use that to continue to grow? Some of the needs with Digital Humanities [are] you need the tools, but also how do we use them? How does this make sense? How do we grow the community further?

We've done a number of different trainings and workshops. Right now, we have a National Endowment for the Humanities [and] Digital Humanities Institute grant for Caribbean Studies. We had an in-person institute and we're moving into doing virtual sessions that will be recorded on different practices and concepts. Then, everyone coming (all of the participants) will be creating teaching materials that will then be available in dLOC for more teachers to use. So, how do we create these virtuous cycles where people are using dLOC and being part of the community, engaging with the community, and sharing more materials?

Chambliss: So, that's a really complicated answer because dLOC is a really complicated thing. I want to go back and think a little bit about what you just described because I think this is really important for people. One of the things I think is really interesting, and one of the reasons I want to have

a conversation about Digital Humanities for this season *Reframing History*, is that, when people say, "Digital Humanities," they tend to have a very narrow definition of what that is. In part because they think of it as, in particular, using a tool to make a thing. This has a lot to do with a kind of media fixation on Digital Humanities. Not to say the projects that appear in *Slate Magazine*, for instance, in their annual roundup of digital humanities projects, aren't good projects. It's just that a lot of those projects are defined by a kind of high-level, almost like a brute force use of digital tools around a particular question. There's a research question here, that is X, Y, and Z and the project produces something that's really accessible in a very particular way.

The more subtle kind of projects, I think, can often be associated with libraries. And, I think we get into the role of libraries as a kind of center of digital humanities activities, which is something we probably should talk about more, in part because one of the recurring themes of all these conversations is hidden labor and there's also a hidden resource burden in Digital Humanities, right? So, the hidden resource burden, I feel, often falls on libraries. [In] my personal experience, libraries are very important in terms of digital humanities work and the libraries' resources, as people tend not to know who are not in academia [that], every year, the demand on library resources grows. [This is] because the technology grows [and] the cost of access to the basic thing (subscriptions) grows. And then, when you start adding on

the cost of creating something like dLOC, which bridges core responsibilities of a library as a repository, as a place of scholarly communication [and] scholarly community—as a place of learning—you have this extra burden on the library and the infrastructure in the library.

I think one of the things that's happened over the last 20 years that has really changed is the role of librarians as drivers of Digital Humanities. Although, the public doesn't necessarily recognize how librarianship has shifted in relation to these discussions. The public is [generally] unaware. If you say "librarian" to the average person, they have one of probably two or three images in their head. This gets at these questions of professionalization. And this is also one of the questions associated with Digital Humanities. If you are a professor, an academic on a tenure track line, and we can talk about the different roles assigned to the teaching faculty, here. We have things like fixed term and people can be stuck in a "contract" job for 20 years. Or, you can be an adjunct, which is even worse. But, when you add in the complexity of Digital Humanities, there are these multiple roles that are assigned. And again, humanities is often associated with a single person spending a lot of time to make a thing. Whereas science is often teams working together, funded by governments who make a thing that's important. And I say that deliberately because everyone goes, "Well, they're there in a lab. They must be making something important," which is part of the reason I think we use terms like "digital humanities lab." We use it to

signal to people that these group of humanities scholars, who [are] supposed to be alone but are working together, are in fact doing something. Each one of them is doing something, but our infrastructure often is not set up to recognize that. This is the one of the weird problems associated with that. And with a project as big as the log, you must have to think about this all the time.

Taylor: Yeah, yesterday I wrote a support letter for someone who's going up for promotion to explain the value of [the] digital work she had shared through dLOC. So, that usage counts [and] that's also what it means, how it changes the field. You know, other feedback, because how else are you going to know that? When you're doing public intellectual work, how does that get captured? How [does] that get supported? Having [a] team who is aware of these concerns and who understands no, it's not enough to have technology. You have to have the whole community support apparatus related to it.

I was on another call where someone was offering to do a workshop on Wikipedia editing and my question to the person was, "Okay, that's awesome. Yes, we would love to have you do that and support it through dLOC. Does your department and your institution understand the value of this work? What supports do we need? Do you need a letter? Do you need me to call your boss? What supports are needed?" For her, it was already understood, so she didn't need additional supports. But some of this, when you talk about humanities scholars, it is the monastic tradition. You're a monk, you're going to go

work in your little cell, you're not going to talk to anyone. That tradition, that stereotype continues to affect us. And so, when [we] wed the Digital Humanities with public intellectualism, what does it mean to be engaged in the public sphere and to try and to benefit society?

So, then that also helps us frame some of the questions on technology because, too often, our world is set up techno utopian, [like,] "The innovators, they're the ones that make everything work." Okay, but I don't really want an innovative sewer system. I want the sewer system to be safe and to work. There are things that [are] not a question of innovation [but are rather] a question of making sure you're doing it right and you want standards, and you want [to] set processes.

We also see this with conversations on minimal computing. Alex Gil, who's at Columbia, has done a lot of work on the lowest level technology that will support the need. This is also like small is beautiful [in that] what's the appropriate technology? Like, you could have a supercomputer do this stuff, but is that what you need and is that the right thing to do? You could innovate and change all this stuff and rework it, but is that what's the best thing for the community and how do [we do] it? How [do we] make sure it's sustainable, it's maintainable? All of those questions go into how we do our technologies and how we do our communities. What's best for the community in terms of sustainable [and] maintainable? How do we make sure we surface the hidden labor and how

do we make sure we then have supports in place to give people credit for their work?

Chambliss: That's a really good answer. And one of the things that's really interesting to me is, because of the dLOC structure, it's a kind of liberatory infrastructure [and therefore] it's bringing together these institutions. And, when you talk about minimal computing, this is so important because a lot of the audience may not have the tools to experience the full effect of some of digital humanities projects. I'm often mindful of this when I think about data visualization. Like, the people who might most be interested in massive data visualization of the Black experience, which is something we can totally do, may not have a computer that will allow them to see it.

One of the things I always, always had to think about at my former institution is [whether] there's a paper version of this. How am I going to get this to actual people who talk to us like when we did this project in class? Maybe radio is the way to go. I actually think podcasting is a great thing because pretty much everyone has a radio, that's like a proven technology. They can listen to it. Even a podcast now, due to penetration on the mobile platform, most low-income people have access. Not everyone; there's a caveat here, but a lot of people. And so, that's one of the reasons I think a podcast is the DH project, even though that's a debate too.

But dLOC is effectively a multi-unit, global-South-centric

digital project that has been sustained since 2004. I'm curious, that liberatory ethos, is that always smooth and easy?

Taylor: It actually kind [of] is easy. You know, in the US, when we talk about libraries and professionalization, you hear things like, "Oh, you don't have a master's degree in library science." Those conversations have been smaller in recent years, which is good. But in the Caribbean, dLOC was born of ACURIL, the Association of Caribbean University Research and Institutional Libraries, which was formed [going], "Okay, we're going to be independent nations where we've just become independent or we're fighting for independence. We're fighting against colonization. We will not be ruled by these queens and kings and outsiders. So, [we want] self-governance, self-determination, [and] liberation for our people, which means we need to have access to the people's information. We need to share the culture of our people in the world. We need to have control of our destiny. And that means that we need libraries. Okay, we're going to make ACURIL." And then, from ACURIL, dLOC is [like], "Okay, how do we do this in the digital age for sharing our information, for building us?"

You have a long history of really fantastic librarians, who are freedom fighters [and] social justice fighters; people who are [like] "How do we make the world a better place and how do we do it through the concept of libraries?" That has continued through today and the other thing is, it's cheaper for libraries to have dLOC than to not have it. The amount of content

everyone has shared, if we were to buy it from a vendor, the University of Florida wouldn't be able to afford it alone, much less the other 70 partners contributing to dLOC [or] the entire world. And it's better for us to have everyone have access. This is a true common situation, where the more people that have access, the better it is for all of us. And so that part is not the hard part.

Chambliss: The question that grows from that is, with the dLOC up and running as an entity and [it] running for so long, you mentioned dLOC has helped redefine the literature around the Caribbean and [that] it does this through multiple ways. That's the other thing about the digital humanities project, the "so what" question. You build a Death Star and you blow up planet, but why? With dLOC, it's a little bit clearer [in that] "We're trying to make clear the complexity of literature in the Caribbean," but there's more going on in the process. There are different modes and different ways you guys are doing that. Can you talk a little bit about the process of making within the context of dLOC?

Taylor: What are the core needs from the community? Starting there, so many of the partners have core materials that have to be preserved. They need to be made accessible. We also need this training for our staff. We also want to know more about what scholars are interested in so people can better teach West Indian literature and teach Caribbean literature. We have these researchers who are coming from Canada or we know that, in Canada, a huge a number of our folks have settled there

and they don't know about their literature. They don't know about their history. Grandmothers don't have stories to read to their grandchildren. They don't have photos of home to share. How do we do that? How do we make that more possible and how do we engage?

Chambliss: That's exactly what I mean. There's a preservation element that is very clear. You have the member groups and the way the dLOC works [when] the member groups put stuff in. And, therefore, it's accessible to users. But then the other side of that is scholars who are searching for questions. So, if you're a scholar of the Caribbean, how do you find out about the dLOC? Do know about it through your library? I know you do fellowships and workshops and things like that. It's like an ecosystem at some level. I think people need to know about the ecosystem. Does that make sense?

Taylor: One of the things we face is how do you reach everyone? Because, at some level, who is not connected to the Caribbean? The history of the Caribbean is the history of slavery, the history of capitalism, and it's the history of the world. It about where the trade winds blow. How do you scale that? We have our designated core community with Caribbean libraries, archives, museums, cultural institutions, and publishers. So that's our first designated community preservation access. The next thing is community capacity. How do we grow our next generation of library, archival, cultural heritage, [and] information workers within our communities? And how do we reach out and connect to others

beyond that and cultural heritage, information professionals, and scholars?

And then there's the diaspora and there's everyone, because how do we represent the Caribbean to the world? Working with folks in the past couple of years, we've really started upping our social media game. We have Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter. Twitter is a great way to meet scholars. We do presentations at different academic conferences. Whenever we hear about Caribbean Studies related digital humanities projects, we catalog them so they're available in dLOC so that we can drive folks from our community [and] make them discoverable and find-able. That is another way we help connect across the community. People will say, "I Googled my stuff and I found that y'all are driving traffic to my site. Thank you." We have a dLOC newsletter that goes out. We do community events in person. We've done a bunch of them in Miami's Little Haiti area. We've done a bunch in Haiti. How do you make all of these things work? And so, we tried to do it all.

Chambliss: You do everything with a staff of how many people?

Taylor: Miguel Asencio is the one dedicated, fulltime dLOC staff member. He is at Florida International University (FIU). Dr Hadassah St. Hubert is also at FIU. She's a Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR) postdoc. The rest of us are parttime and how do we all contribute to the greater whole.

Chambliss: One of the things about digital humanities projects is the evolution, the life cycle. DH projects are never "over," especially if you're doing it alone. It's worth noting most DH projects are under-sourced and under-labored; there's not necessarily a lot of people involved with them, which is part of [the] reason they're never over. The person has [to] find time, there's no DH jobs per se. They do have jobs with DH responsibilities attached to them. We can talk endlessly about this, but [there's] not a lot [of] departments of Digital Humanities with tenure track lines in them. That is not how it works. There's that element, but then there's the question mark around institutional things, right?

[And] dLOC is a really strong institutional thing. It's been around in the DH...forever, since 2004. And if you were looking for something dating from 2004 on the Internet that is still a thriving project, you can't find it. It's dead. What's the future of dLOC? Is the plan to continue to evolve it? [It's] an organic thing by its very nature, right? Like, the very nature of it is organic. Like, it continues to grow, to evolve. In terms of planning for the future, how do you see it? What's the discussion about dLOC's evolution and sustainability and the places it may go?

Taylor: How do we amplify everything we're already doing and then how do we also think about our line of flight? Let's look to the stars and look at that trajectory for where we want to go. Where we want to go is: how do we do the work in terms of empowering our scholars, supporting our graduate

students, supporting librarians, archivists, and supporting greater understanding about the region? [It's] a huge mission and we're all digitizing materials for preservation and access. We are finding more grants to do even more of that. How do we then scale those and look at those ongoing technical updates? If you look at the DLOC site, it's dated, and that's part of minimal computing but computer standards have evolved. We're working on doing an update for the site. Hopefully it will be done in the next year. Having it more updated and then, after that, we're not completely clear on it. We've got the scholarly advisory board, who will [help] inform where we go. We've got all the people working with the NEH Digital Humanities Institute for where we want to go in terms of teaching.

But one of the things we've also been looking at is the shrinking of [the] academic job market [and] the super standardization of K-12 schools where teachers have less flexibility for teaching things. How do we insert the Caribbean, which is already there but hidden, into other areas? One project is looking at materials related to the Morant Bay rebellion in Jamaica that's [also] really important for Victorian studies and people who do British literature. How do we connect those? Because, in terms of building community, if we build the library collections, we build the teaching resources [and] people have them together. Then, how do we connect the researchers? Often our folks will say, "there's one Caribbean studies person in an English Department of 40

people." Who do they get to work with? How do they get to collaboratively teach? And since digital humanities projects do require more labor, how do they envision that when they're alone? How do we put in place the conditions that will foster and make possible those collaborations at a local level? Collaborating doing Zoom calls [and] collaborating with people at a distance, totally possible, but it's so much easier if you can do it in person and locally.

Chambliss: Yes, that is really a question mark, especially for a subject area specialist. As you say, you're often the only person doing your thing, especially in the contemporary landscape. They don't hire a bunch of people doing things [like that] anymore. They hire one person to do this thing and often they're doing this thing across a large historical period, which decades ago would probably not happen. Faculty covered the same geography, but they had their subfields, be it Victorian or Modern, and those people had geographic ties. Now, the department hires one person. A lot of institutions, as we know, don't have the resources and faculty lines are not being replaced, which gives rise to questions about the neoliberal university.

Taylor: Yes. How do we push back against the neoliberal university and the devolution cycle of privatization? We need to be public intellectuals to do that. But...that means we have even more work. [It's] more work on people who are already overstretched, overworked, covering multiple areas, covering more classes, working more than they ever have before. The

research from 20 years ago was that an average English professor was working 60 hours a week. When you consider the service, all of the different letters that you're doing, the student mentoring. What we have to be able to come together to make that more feasible so we can do the public intellectual work to fight the devolution every cycle.

Chambliss: Yeah, and that's presumably [what] could be a benefit of DH work. It can be a magnifier. This is one of the things we hope for when we think about how the Digital Humanities is amplifying community. It does amplify some of these vital questions and conversations. I always try to keep these things short. This is a good place to stop. If people are looking to know more about dLOC, the web address is...

Taylor: *www.dloc.com*. You can email us. We're always available through Twitter, Facebook, anything.

Chambliss: Thank you taking the time to talk to me for *Reframing History*.

CONNIE L. LESTER AND FINDING REGIONAL HISTORY

> "At this point we have 75 partners and those are academics, other universities, tech firms in the Orlando area, local museums, and historical societies. And when I say 75 partners, I always feel like I have to say this because that sounds like, Oh you've just got this list of people who've talked to you. No, those are 75 partners with whom we have done projects."
>
> Connie L. Lester

What is the role of regional digital humanities projects? While many people may not have heard of it, the [Regional Initiative to Collect History, Experiences, and Stories](#) (RICHES) is an impressive example of a digital humanities project focused on a specific region. With central Florida as the focal point, RICHES provides faculty and students at the University of Central Florida with a digital home for various projects. For this episode, I spoke with Dr. Connie Lester, Associate Professor of History, Editor of the *Florida Historical Quarterly*, and Director of RICHES. In operation since 2010, RICHES is a community-centered digital humanities project.

What are the benefits of such a program? How might it evolve? While there are better known digital humanities projects, there is a vital need represented by this kind of digital practice. In our conversation, we discuss the origins of the project, its evolution, and possible pathways as it continues to evolve.

Keywords:

Community, Archive, Public History, Region, Culture, Platform

The Conversation

Chambliss: Connie Lester, thank you so much for taking the time to talk to me today. Can you tell people what your title is and your project?

Lester: I'm an associate professor at the University of Central Florida and my project is called RICHES, that stands for The Regional Initiative to Collect History, Experiences, and Stories.

Chambliss: I think a lot of people might have heard of RICHES, but they don't actually know what the acronym stands for. The question I always ask everyone related to this is: how do you define Digital Humanities?

Lester: Well, digital humanities, that's an interesting question. I think there are many definitions for it. For me, Digital Humanities means I'm taking things we associate with the humanities, art, literature, music—even the kinds of things

we talk about in terms of local cultural connections—and we put them in a digital format so people can have access to it. Because, while they may have access to a very local culture or a very specific part of the humanities, putting it in digital format gives them a broader context for looking at the humanities they're interested in.

Chambliss: For RICHES, which is coming up on its 10th anniversary, what was the origin of that project and how did you become the director?

Lester: Actually, it came [about] as the result of a project by the Dean of the College of Arts and Humanities (at the University of Central Florida) at the time, José Fernández. He was interested in creating collaborative projects within the college so that we weren't siloed into History and English and Writing and Rhetoric and Philosophy, but instead would work together to understand the humanities. And he had offered grant money for individual projects in which professors collaborated with someone in another department. Those (projects) went very well, but as soon as a particular project was over, everybody went back to [the] silos and did their own thing. He was looking for a way to make this a sustainable project. He said to the History department, if you could come up with a way to make this sustainable, to make a project where it's ongoing, I will fund it to get it off the ground. We (the History Department) said, we can do this.

We all met, talked about it, and we had the idea of making a digital project people would continue to interact with. And

that was the start of it. The other thing I do is I'm the editor of the *Florida Historical Quarterly*, and I had a real interest in how this was going to work as far as Florida was concerned. As we started deciding we were going to create this database, it sort of evolved that I became the director. I don't remember there this sudden moment [was in] which it was decided I [was] going to be director. Perhaps my colleagues realized how much work it was going to be and I was the foolish one who did not. It might have been that sort of thing. But, I've never been sorry I did it, even though I don't think I imagined at first how much work it was going to be. [Still], I'm very glad I did (accept the position).

Chambliss: One of the things that intrigued me about RICHES is that it represents a kind of intersection around Digital Humanities. I'm aware of the project because of my time working in central Florida, but many people do not know it. When I think of RICHES, I recognize it is a massive repository of material. You collect material and users can search for things in the collection. Yet, RICHES also acts as a kind of digital platform. As the director of RICHES, how do you see it?

Lester: It is and it isn't. Yes, it is a repository and it's a repository for a lot of different kinds of projects that happen in conjunction with RICHES without being RICHES itself. For example, in other departments, as they are creating projects they are interested in, they (the project PI) oftentimes comes to me and talks about that project in terms of [if] of the work

they're doing can end up in the RICHES repository. So, right now, I'm on several different grants that other people have initiated and what they are doing with us is [putting] the materials they create inside the RICHES repository so it's available (to a larger audience). They (the contributing project) may have their own website, and many of them do have their own website where you can go and look at that project specifically. But the digital assets that are created go into the RICHES database so people can use those assets in different ways.

That (access to the primary sources of a project) comes to another part on the research side of the project. One of our goals is to not just be a space in which, as I phrase it, someone searches and looks. That is, they are searching for a particular item, they find it in the RICHES database, they look at it, and then they go off to something else. One of the things we want people to be able to do is to see how their item is connected to other things we have in the database that they may not have thought about.

We developed a tool inside the RICHES site where people can find an item and click on this tool called "Connections." It looks at tags and topics and dates and locations, and it will find other items in the database that fill that search criteria. When you get that first tree of information, it's kind of a grab bag. For many of the things (returned by the search) you would say, "Well, that has nothing to do with what I'm looking for." But you can use a drop-down menu and customize that search for

what you are looking for. If you're primarily looking for things that are the same date, you can just click on "date" and it will pull up things that have the same date or the same location or the same tag or the same topics, or any two of those. So, you can customize the search to see things that are there (and important to your research).

We think [the] tool operates well, and we would like it to be even more intuitive than it is, but we think it operates somewhat like an archivist would. He or she would say to you, you're looking at this collection, but I know this thing is in another collection that is of interest to you. And they go and pull it for you. That's how we see that working. In that way, the database becomes something that is more useful to you than simply the one item you looked at.

The second tool we created (is the BookBag). We want people to be able to work on the site, to work with the information that is there in the database. We created a BookBag tool that allows you to save items of interest to you. It will be there when you come back because you have to register your BookBag. You can write notes about that item and they will be saved. You can put items into folders you create and name [them]. You can see the items in a folder, on a timeline. You can see the items in a folder on a map. A description field will give you the information about each individual item. There is a storyboard where you can place the items and include text that will help you create a narrative. We want you to be thinking about it (the RICHES archive), not

just as a place where you can see some cool images or see some cool documents, but a place where you can actually work like a historian and begin to make sense of it.

Right now, our BookBags are individual. In the future, we plan to allow people [to] share [them]. A family could share a BookBag and research their family. Or, a historical society could be doing particular research and share that research. Or, [a] class could (work on a class project). We not only look for the history and record and archive the history, but we want to provide space for people to work with that history themselves and make sense of it. When you go on one of our partners' sites and they have developed this whole project in which they have an interpretation of the event or whatever it is they're working with, you see how they have curated it, how they have put their own interpretation on it, but we (RICHES database) have the individual elements of it. Now, you can look at their interpretation on the one hand and you can go in our database, see the elements, and decide for yourself how that interpretation fits for you. Or, you may see other things in there or other questions you can ask because you're looking at the original materials they used.

Chambliss: The way RICHES exists is almost like a digital commons at some level that's allowing people to interact with it. That functionality is, I think, somewhat enhanced by what you've talked about [regarding] things like History Harvest or other things that are a constant part of the way RICHES has grown over the years. Then you also have other faculty

within the department that work with RICHES with various concepts (centered) around classes or projects. RICHES is a living thing. Is there a vision for RICHES to ever stop growing or is it going to continue forever?

Lester: Oh, I think it could go on forever because one of the things that makes it living, I think, is that it's not just my project. I happen to be the director, but it's not just my project.

Chambliss: Let me ask you about this because the idea that it's not your project and you are just the director, does that mean you are acting as a steward? So, the goal from your perspective is to create stability within this digital environment as opposed to there's some research question you're trying to answer?

Lester: Yes, and there are research questions I have but, oftentimes, research questions come from others as they begin to see what RICHES can do and [what] they want to; they want to be a part of it. One of the ways it's living, I think, is that faculty members come to me with their own ideas of a project they want to do and ask [me] how I [can] help them with that project. How can they interact with RICHES on that project? All the ideas don't have to come from me. All the ideas are coming from outside, but they're not just (UCF) faculty members who are doing this. We have partnerships with other universities who talk to us about things they want to do with RICHES. We have partnerships with community organizations who want to do projects. They want to bring us

in on it to help them do it. So, it's living in the sense that there are so many people involved.

At this point, we have 75 partners and those are (UCF) academic (departments) and other universities, tech firms in the Orlando area, local museums, and historical societies. And when I say 75 partners, I always feel like I have to say this because that sounds like, "Oh, you've just got this list of people who've talked to you." No, those are 75 partners with whom we have done projects and some of those projects (are long-term). Some of them have been completed. But 75 projects—that's a lot of work.

Chambliss: So, as a huge digital project that is ongoing, one of the recurring themes [in] all these conversations is it costs money. It benefits from being a project of the University of Central Florida's Department of History, but is that enough? Is RICHES a sustainable project?

Lester: We benefit enormously from the fact that the Dean's office was interested in this first and the Dean's office remains interested. [It's] an enormous asset. We have some staff members, we have a (dedicated) programmer, and we have a metadata editor, who are staff paid by the university. I can't say enough about how important [it] is [to] have that access. But it's sustainable because many of our digital partners or our tech firm partners have, at various times, provided us with tech support in terms of actual pieces of equipment or in terms of tech support, and they use their staff and their time to help us with a project.

That's the in-kind benefit that we have gotten and we have always been very grateful to them. In fact, when we first began to build the site, we did not have a programmer. There was a local tech firm that sat down with us and helped us work through our functionality document. We then got some grant funding for them and they built the original site. It has been rebuilt and reconfigured a number of times now. But they built the original site. We could not have done that. None of us had that kind of technical expertise to be able to do that at that point. We benefited enormously from that kind of support that we've had.

And we benefit from the fact that we are a university and so many of the faculty members have incorporated parts of what we do into their classrooms. So, their students are learning digital skills and they are contributing to a larger project. They can put (the work) on their resume and provide a link to show what they did when they worked with us. We have benefited a lot from other people being willing to work with us and to provide things we don't have sitting right there in front of us. But we also do a lot of grant writing. We've been pretty successful in getting grants. Grant funding is hard to get for the most part, but we've been pretty successful.

Chambliss: It's important to note that we're here at the Association of African American Museums meeting, which is why there's all this noise in the background. And you were on a panel here and I was on a panel as well. Brandon Nightingale, one of the graduates from the UCF Public History program,

talked about his experience working with RICHES. He talked about his friend being in class with Dr. Scott French, Director of Public History at UCF, who does a lot of things with RICHES. In many ways, the ecosystem you were talking about is on display here because Brandon is now a professor at Bethune-Cookman University and he teaches his own class on archiving.

Lester: We have been very successful with our students. Brandon and Porsha Dossie, who was another public history student who worked with RICHES, both did internships at the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History. (RICHES) has been very good for our students. Our students come out with some digital skills [and] they leverage those digital skills and interests in many ways. Some go on to PhD programs or they go on to take positions at museums or archives.

Chambliss: From your perspective, RICHES is succeeding in [the] mission you see for it. I find [it] interesting because, as you say, it could go on forever. But realistically, as a living digital project, it's really old. I was struck by the fact that you are coming up on your 10-year anniversary. 10 years in digital years is 50 years in human years. What's the future look like for RICHES as an ongoing project? What do you foresee as your challenges? What are the opportunities? There's always opportunity. Are there challenges?

Lester: I think the reason RICHES has been here for 10 years is because we're constantly innovating. We didn't decide

that a database was enough. We have been pushed sometimes by our staff. In fact, our first programmer, Connie Harper, was always pushing us to do something a little bit different, to add this or to do that, or to think about something else. We have a team that works together that is very much an interdisciplinary team that includes computer scientists (and historians). We're constantly seeing new things and figuring out how might we use that in our project or how might we leverage that.

One of the areas of RICHES that has been getting bigger and bigger is that primary research side, not in history but in digital itself. We completed the digitization of the *Sanford Herald* newspaper; the original copies are owned by the Museum of Seminole County History. And, at some point in the past, it was microfilmed, and microfilm is somewhat permanent. But even microfilm has its problems, and they were beginning to be concerned about the microfilm. One of our tech partners agreed, for a very nominal sum, to digitize the microfilm. Digitizing microfilm does not always get you a very good scan. There were community members who were associated with the museum, many of them retired librarians, that went through it scan by scan to pull out the ones that were a problem and have them rescanned. That was about a two-and-a-half-year project. There were over 300 reels of microfilm. This took two and a half, maybe three years. They (the Museum of Seminole County History) gave it to (RICHES). We OCR-d (Optical Character Recognition) it. That took another a year and a half or two years. OCR is not that good,

especially when it's done from microfilm, and even when it's done from newspapers (originals) because there are different types (fonts), (the print and paper) deteriorate over time, (producing an) OCR that is not very good.

One of the people on our (core) team is a computer scientist. He began to look at our OCR results and he [thought] other things we digitized that are historic [didn't] OCR very well. Oftentimes, (even typed documents are) on a very thin paper. [The document may be] the fourth typed copy, etc. So, he began to investigate and talk about how we [could] improve OCR to deal with [those issues]. He thought (improved OCR) had multiple applications outside history. There are (numerous) agencies who deal with (the) problem (of legibility) too. Recently, (legibility and OCR) became a public discussion and grant money became available. We were already thinking about it before grant money became available. We were ready to jump in and put in grant applications for it. That (example is) more of a basic kind of research problem than simply understanding the images and documents we have in the database.

There is (the archival) side of what (we do) that's a very multidisciplinary kind of thing. (But) we're also working on a RICHES project (that is of interest to) computer scientists who (also see it) as a research project. I also think the History Harvests that we do keep the juices moving in an important way because, (in that case, RICHES is) working with a local community. They (the community) decide the direction they

want to go with a History Harvest. Every History Harvest has a theme and they (the local historical organization) put it out to the community that they're looking for specific kinds of items.

Members of the community come in [and] they bring all kinds of things (from their personal collections). There's a dynamic to a History Harvest. It's not just standing there waiting for your images to be scanned. People are talking about stories they've heard [and] they're anxious to tell you (about the history they remember or have heard through family stories). When I go to the History Harvest, I have (someone designated to) do the scanning [and] someone else greeting people. But people tell us their stories. (The scans of personal images and documents are important, but the stories) move (the RICHES project) forward (and suggest other areas of local history) we need to look at.

We have [a History Harvest] coming up with the LGBTQ museum in Orlando. They (the LGBT museum) want to do a History Harvest with African American members of the LGBTQ community. You never know how many people are going to show up. You never know what you're going to get out of this.

We've gotten some amazing things from History Harvests and these are things in people's own collections. We're talking about hidden history, about something that is not in a museum anywhere. It's in somebody's private collection and they bring it to us. We [also] get people coming to us with [personal family items] to digitize them. They want them in

the RICHES database. [They want their history to be publicly available.] RICHES recently digitized a collection donated by a citrus family. It's not in any museum. We just completed the digitization and the metadata editor is adding metadata now. It is a really complete history (of a family and the economic development of Central Florida). Finally, we have another avenue for contributing to the RICHES database...a contribute button (that enables users to submit) digitized items (for consideration for inclusion in the database).

The RICHES database includes a small collection that is my absolute favorite. It came from a family in South Florida. It consists of only six items, but it tells a real story about that family. The family's grandfather migrated from The Bahamas. The collection includes the entry paperwork where he came into the US. He went to work for the Florida East Coast Railway. He worked in the rail yard. There's a picture of him in his overalls standing in the rail yard. He and his wife literally built their house in Miami. And there's a picture of them sitting on the stoop. The house is not quite finished yet, but they are building the house. There is his obituary. The obituary tells the story of his life and family. That's a complete story that probably would never end up in [a] university or museum archive. It's a very small collection, but it's a complete story. (Through the RICHES connection tool,) we can link it to other immigrant stories and other stories of African Americans or Black families in South Florida or in Florida generally. You know, it's a very complete story and it's those

kinds of things that keep the project alive, that keep us excited about the things we're doing.

Chambliss: Well, thanks for taking the time [to] talk to me and [for] dealing with the background noise. I really appreciate it. I think we have a better understanding of RICHES. Thank you for joining me.

PART IV
COMMUNITY AND DIGITAL HUMANITIES

The Consortium for Critical Diversity in a Digital Age (CEDAR) is a new research collaborative housed in the College of Arts and Letters at Michigan State University. The members of CEDAR, Kristin Arola, Christina Boyles, Julian Chambliss, and Sharon Leon, are drawn to community-oriented framing of digital humanities. What that means and how it will function is yet to be determined, but the values that practice embodies guide their vision of digital humanities.

CONSORTIUM FOR CRITICAL DIVERSITY IN A DIGITAL AGE RESEARCH (CEDAR) AND A COMMUNITY-CENTRIC DIGITAL HUMANITIES

"Our work is critically and culturally engaged. We are dedicated to working with and for our communities and publics. As a result, our digital practice is human-centered and ethically grounded. Together we seek to engender empathy and respect for multiple perspectives by considering the lessons of our pasts, presents, and futures."

The Vision statement for The Consortium for Critical Diversity in Digital Age Research (CEDAR)

The perfect way to wrap up these reflections on Digital Humanities is with a conversation among members of The Consortium for Critical Diversity in a Digital Age Research (CEDAR). The members of CEDAR include the following people. Kristin Arola, Associate Professor in the department of

Writing, Rhetoric, and American Cultures (WRAC); Kristin's work focuses on the intersections between American Indian rhetoric, multimodal pedagogy, and digital rhetoric. Christina Boyles, Assistant Professor of Culturally Engaged Digital Humanities in the department of Writing, Rhetoric, and American Cultures (WRAC); Christina's work explores the relationship between disaster, social justice, and the environment. Julian Chambliss, Professor in the department of English; Julian's work focuses on real and imagined urban spaces with an emphasis on race, power, and community. Sharon Leon, Associate Professor in the Department of History; Sharon's research focuses on American religion with a concentration on US Catholicism and in digital methods with a focus on public history. Since 2018, the core faculty have been on the Michigan State University campus working on the vision for CEDAR. The vision statement says, in part, CEDAR is "critically and culturally engaged" and dedicated to "communities and publics." Those words define the work we pursue individually and provide a common grounding for what CEDAR might accomplish.

Keywords

Diversity, Digital Humanities, Community, Race, Culture, Data, Teaching, Praxis

The Conversation

CHAMBLISS: We're here with my colleagues from CEDAR, which stands for the Consortium for Critical Diversity in a Digital Age Research, which is a new initiative at MSU and it's also the reason I personally came to MSU. I thought it'd be great in the context of this episode of *Reframing History* to talk to them because, of course, the theme for this season is: was what about Digital Humanities? I can't really do that without talking to my colleagues, who I think of as people who are deeply engaged with Digital Humanities. We're going to do a round-robin, introduce ourselves, and we're going to start with Sharon, who you've heard before on the podcast, but [who is] coming back in a different iteration as part of the team of CEDAR.

LEON: There we go. Well, happy to be here with Julian again today. I'm Sharon Leon, and I'm in the history department here at MSU, but I'm also a core faculty member in CEDAR.

CHAMBLISS: Right. Christina?

BOYLES: Hi, I'm Christina Boyles. I'm an Assistant Professor of Culturally Engaged Digital Humanities. I think that title is super cool, so I like to share it. I'm in the Writing, Rhetoric, and American Cultures department at MSU.

AROLA: I'm Kristin Arola. I am also in the Writing, Rhetoric, and American Cultures department at MSU. I'm

also affiliate faculty in the American Indian and Indigenous Studies program, as well as Digital Humanities.

CHAMBLISS: Right. Of course, I feel like I have to say it. I'm Julian Chambliss, your host, and also core faculty in DH and a member of CEDAR. As always, I ask people: how did you get here? In this context, how did you become a member of CEDAR? I always use [a] comic book analogy, so I always think about CEDAR as the X-Men, but that's just me. How did you guys make your way to MSU to become a part of the consortium? Let's start with Kristin.

AROLA: Yeah, I ended up at Michigan State after being at Washington State University for 11 years, where I directed an undergrad program on digital technology and culture. [It] aligned really neatly with my research interests, which are in American Indian studies and digital rhetoric, more specifically. Putting those things side by side, [I look] at the ways Indigenous communities engage with visual technologies and what we can learn about our own teaching by looking at Indigenous making practices. With that experience behind me, coming to MSU I was actually a CEDAR hire, so I was hired to work with this group. But I think as other folks in the group will say, as we've merged and coming together and talked about our shared interest and overlaps, I think we are also figuring out first what CEDAR can be, and second, what our role in it is. I guess I came to be here through my interests, but also probably, in large part, which connects to my interests, would be that I am always interested in humans first and digital

technology second. I have a very human-centered approach to digital work.

CHAMBLISS: Christina, how did you make your way?

BOYLES: Yeah, I think I want to say a lot of things similar to Kristin. Before coming to Michigan State, I was running a digital community center at Trinity college, which is a small private liberal arts school in Connecticut. I had seen just a handful of jobs that seemed [up my alley], so I did a very small run of the market in Digital Humanities in particular. I was really drawn to MSU's ad because it did put humans first. It was looking for someone who worked with community organizations, who was interested in cultural issues, and really [in] the ways identity intersects with digital technology. All of the other interviews I went on, especially given my background being from literature, most of those other jobs were focused on things like text analysis, and they wanted to know did I know R. And while I have some experience in those areas, those are not the things that excite me about digital communities, although I do see value in them. I was really drawn towards CEDAR and this particular position because it really framed our relationships with digital tools as being human-centered and human-sourced.

CHAMBLISS: And, of course, Sharon?

LEON: Yeah, I also was a CEDAR hire and the way the hires for CEDAR were structured, they were looking for some kind of elder states people in the field of DH and some newer folks to the field. I fall into the old folks category to some

degree. I had spent 13 or 14 years at the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media at George Mason University, where I had been the founding director of the Division of Public projects, which was really focused on doing broad linkage digital public work. I came with that as the base of my connection to the proposed CEDAR mission, wanting to build infrastructure that made it possible for a larger group of people to get engaged with digital public history and those kinds of things.

But, in addition to doing that work, I was in the early stages of a project I'm a little bit further along on now about the history of enslavement, really focusing particularly on the lives and experiences of enslaved people in a particular location and trying to represent them in an ethical way in a digital space. I guess the connection is both at the broad range about building useful technologies for doing this work that is critical about the ways a broad group of people engage in a digital space, but also in some very specific research goals.

CHAMBLISS: I guess I should say that I, too, was a CEDAR hire in the English Department. I still don't know exactly how they found me, but I was asked to apply. Of course, I research comics. I'm a historian in an English department, which isn't weird at all. I thought this was a great opportunity. I freely admit I was really intrigued by the idea of CEDAR as an entity, as it was described in my interview process, because I did a lot of community-based work. My old job, was [at] a teaching intensive institution, but we did

a lot with the community. A lot of my classes were in the community and [we did] all the digital things. The only reason I really started to do it was because I wanted to work with the community—in particular communities of color—around questions of erasure and community narratives, and helping to give voice to community concerns.

At some level, the whole idea of CEDAR, at least as it was explained to me, made a lot of sense to me. Of course, making the move to a place like Michigan coming from Florida was...yeah. This is something I want to try to do, want to explore. I think the idea represented by CEDAR was really intriguing, but that doesn't really get us into a place where we get to talk a little bit about what CEDAR is. It's important for people listening to the podcast [to know] we are all in different departments, which means we're tenured in different departments. I think it's fair to describe CEDAR [as] a dean's initiative, meaning the Dean's office—at least in the context of the English department as was explained to me—really is working with the departments.

You say [when] you want to hire, "I really want this program called CEDAR, and I'll give you a line if you'll hire someone in terms of CEDAR." Initially, when I first learned about the position, CEDAR was supposed to be six people in the original definition. It's no longer going to be six people. The four people you're listening to are going to be the only people in CEDAR. When we came in, we had to go through a process of figuring out what CEDAR is, right? We've been going

through a series of conversations about that since we've arrived.

I want to ask each member of the group to think about what that process meant to you as you envisioned the possibility of CEDAR and how does that relate to both the work you're doing, [like] visual work, and the possibility of collective work represented by CEDAR as we define it (a research collaborative within the broader MSU landscape). Let's start with Christina because Christina recently was on the Liberal Arts Endeavor podcast, which I listened to [and] she did a great job. Those were great. She talked a little about CEDAR in that interview. That was a really good answer, so you can start and then we'll jump in.

BOYLES: Well, I think one of the most important things for me, given that I'm the most junior member of this group, is I see CEDAR being vital to me as a cohort of people who understand the kind of work I do—who share the same kinds of values and who are interested in the same kind of things. As I mentioned before, my background is in literature, but I'm in a writing and rhetoric department. So, while many of those two fields' interests do overlap and are shared, there are some areas where I feel less knowledgeable. So, I feel like I'm able to call on members of CEDAR. I've looked at Sharon for advice on oral history and grant writing and Kristin on how to translate the kinds of work I do into writing and rhetoric more clearly. I've talked to Julian about all his work, being [in] a great community, working with community organizations,

and being a leader in the field. So, I see this group as a great source of mentorship and support, in addition to a group that can help move the mission of community-engaged research forward in Michigan and at MSU.

CHAMBLISS: Sharon, I know you talked a little bit about the work you're doing and your ongoing project, but you also have—as listeners to the earlier episode of the podcast will know—a really strong relationship in terms of the digital infrastructure and working with public humanities. I think for you, CEDAR is perhaps both an opportunity that's different but, at some level, maybe it resonates with other things. Can you talk a little bit about how you see CEDAR and that landscape of possibility?

LEON: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, I think you're right about that. I think lots of the values we've come to put at the center of the way we talk about CEDAR really do echo the kinds of things that have arisen both out of the community that's developed around the open source software project that I run, Omeka, but also the values at the heart of public history practice. [Those values are] so deeply built around a commitment to shared authority and co-creation, as well as a deeper practice. That's not necessarily, nine times out of 10, the kinds of things most historians will tell you about their work, so there's something different there in community-engaged history with digital means attached to it that is, at its heart, interdisciplinary in a way that CEDAR is also interdisciplinary but focused [on] those core values.

You may not think about like...well, software development is this culture of broey guys who are hacking things together and things like that, but I would say really successful open source software development is about focusing on those values as well. Because the creation of a generalized software that lots of people can successfully use really means that we have to have a vibrant conversation about what the needs of the user community are and what the needs of the developer community are, and how we can all work together to do those sorts of things. There's a nice layering of these continuing conversations in lots of areas of my life. I really enjoyed seeing CEDAR grow out in those similar directions.

CHAMBLISS: Kristin, I know that you talked about how you got here. You talked specifically about being interested in the human. When you think about CEDAR and your interest in the human, how are they aligning? How is the pathway that we're on fitting into that?

AROLA: [I'm going to] try not to make this too long. I never really considered myself a digital humanities person. I considered myself a computers and writing person. Which, if you come from Digital Humanities, might not mean much to you. If you come from computers and writing, you'd be like, "Yeah!" That was my fists up there. But the point being that I come [from] and was trained by my PhD— Cynthia Selfe in particular...she started the *Journal of Computers of Composition*—was really interested in the ways word processing at the time was changing the face of teaching and

of writing pedagogy, in particular. But she was always very interested in…when I say human first, she was very interested in not so much what's the new cool zoomy thing that technology can do for us. It was more [like] "What are the communities around us and the people with which we engage, what are they looking for? What might they need and how is technology interfacing with those people in particular ways for the particular context we're in?"

I guess when I think about that lineage and my own work in this group, and then particularly my work with American Indian communities and epistemologies, I'm hesitant when I say human-centered and I'm only saying human-centered insofar as I want it to mean not tech-centered. [That's] what I mean when I say that, right? I don't want it to be tech-centered, or I want it to be more in this relational model of…when I ask a question about how people work, what people need, the ethics of a situation, whatever, I want to look at the humans in the situation, the land they're on, the politics in that situation. The technology is part of that too, right? All those things in constellation and relation to each other and the ways they pivot and circulate and constellate with each other. But when I say human-centered focus, especially when I'm thinking about CEDAR, I really just say "human-centered" insofar as I don't…and I don't think any of us, and myself in particular, are focused on the tools solely without all those other things that constellate around it.

CHAMBLISS: Yeah. I mean, I think for myself, I do think

of CEDAR as a community-centric exercise. I'm like Kristin, at some level. At some point, someone just said to me, "You're our DH person because you're at school and no one else is doing it." That old saying, "In a room full of blind people, a one-eyed man…" It's that kind of thing. Then you start to think about, at least from my own perspective, I started thinking about, "Well, what does that actually mean given my focus on community?" Because, if forced, I always say like, "Yeah, I do Black DH. I'm working on Black community around [a] very particular set of things." There are very particular kinds of people I'm trying to emulate and trying to understand what they're doing. The goals are not necessarily academic goals. It's like, "Did the community enjoy what I did? Did they get some value out of it?" It did not matter [to] my own job because I would get tenure on other things. I literally would just be like, "Is everybody okay with what we did?" And [it] really inspired my praxis that was informed by our conversations because, after a while, when you work with a group, their needs become clear and you can follow up on them, right? Even if they don't necessarily say, "We want you to do this," if you work closely enough with them that they want X at some level, then you can check in. I always thought that CEDAR was supposed to be down at some very basic level, but at the same time, we are a collective.

For a lot of people who might know about Michigan State University, I sometimes joke, but it's not really a joke. It's like the Mecca of digital things. There are a lot of digital things we

can associate with MSU. Some of those things are, in digital terms, I don't mean this in a bad way, ancient. Like H-Net, Matrix, these things are old. In digital terms, they're super old. They're very important, but they're super old. They have a lot of cultural currency; so, as a group, we're coming in and, at some level, having these conversations about what CEDAR is as a group and it fits into the infrastructure of DH. That really, I think, has been one of the most interesting and rewarding conversations for me as we talk about what could CEDAR do. What *could* CEDAR do? Is it going to be a CEDAR thing or is it going to be—to continue with my X-Men analogy—we're all off on our individual adventures and only come together when there's trouble. That really opens up the question of this evolution, and it's important to recognize as a new initiative we've had really just this one year [to] all be here together because we were hired [from] rival campuses at different times.

We've gone through a process of stabilizing, getting to know each other, meeting, writing bylaws, and this bigger question of what could CEDAR be given our values. Because, I think we share a lot of the same values. It's something we're still talking about. There's no right answer or wrong answer to this next question: how do we forecast CEDAR moving forward, or what do we hope for? But I think it'd be really interesting to think about what CEDAR as an entity, as a research collaborative. [In that way, what] might [it] possibly do for us as individual members of the collaborative, but also as a collaborative act? What is CEDAR going to take on for itself? I

want to throw that question out to Sharon first and then we'll go around and talk about that, too. What could CEDAR be in that context?

LEON: You had to start with me because, just like everybody else in the conversation at the moment, I'm still trying to figure that out. One way to go about this is for us to decide we want to undertake some shared ventures. I think the ways we could undertake those shared ventures might be about trying to identify people who share our values, who might need some support and scaffolding and infrastructure to do similar kinds of work that the rest of us have undertaken in a variety of places throughout our careers. All of us have had winding careers in lots of little pockets here and there, and [we've] done a lot of different things. But I think together, the four of us could think about the ways we could try to provide some of that metacognitive stuff for other people in the field. Digital Humanities is so often a field, and I'm fully in sync with this—doing things we often don't get the excuse to really step back and articulate the values around the choices we make and those sorts of things. Or how to articulate frameworks that let people carry those values forward. I think that that could be one of the really valuable things we could do together.

CHAMBLISS: Kristin, I know you've been really key in helping us organize. I really appreciate the work you've done and like, "Yeah, we need to work on this." You know our mission statement. I know you know it by heart. That's a joke. She doesn't know it by heart.

AROLA: I sure do, Julian.

CHAMBLISS: I'm making that up. She doesn't know it by heart.

AROLA: I do happen to have it in front of me, though.

CHAMBLISS: We all worked on this collectively, but [it's] the jumping off point for you to [perhaps] voice your own views on what CEDAR could be.

AROLA: Yeah, it was kind of fun to go back to this because we spent a lot of time in conference rooms together with this Google Doc open trying to figure out, "Okay, what is our mission, what is our vision, and what are our goals? What are we trying to do with this?" I like where we ended up, it was nice to go back and look at it, quite frankly. We talk in this [document] about being a catalyst for MSU human-centered digital scholarship and public engagement, specifically anything that's working to promote a diverse future. We talked about being critically and culturally engaged, and then we have these three major goals—reclaiming, preserving and interconnecting—which I think are pretty cool goals if we can make that work. I've [been] thinking about riffing off what Sharon just said. I really like that notion of having a space where we get to take the time to think about why it is we're building the infrastructures and [why we] want to do the things we're doing in the first place, right? Or some slow infrastructure building that's mindful and considering all those constellations, I guess, that's around the things people actually might want to do and want to achieve. I think the

four of us together are pretty good at doing that work. A lot of, "Wait, why? Wait, why? Wait, how? Okay. That's cool." It's not that we're naysayers. It's just that I think we're all pretty mindful of like, "Okay, that sounds awesome, so if you want to do that, who's community is that impacting? What are the levels of access and infrastructure and human labor and all the things [like] histories that come with the choices that you're making?" And [CEDAR] provides a space to have those conversations. I think [that] is pretty cool.

Also, to provide a space at MSU [for it]... Slowly, I think we've been having...[well], Gordon Henry and English has come to us now a couple times for a few things and he works in American Indian studies specifically. But he came to us looking to hook up with the National Archives Strategic Planning grant on this call's project they're doing. It's the Center for Anishinaabe Language, Literature, and Storytelling, and that's just getting started. There was going to be a summer retreat, so we'll see what happens with that. But the fact we can be a place where someone could come to say, "Hey, we want to do this Anishinaabe language and storytelling thing. We need a digital component to it. How can we have that conversation together?," [is amazing]. For the four of us to talk that through and think about it, I think is pretty cool and pretty exciting moving forward.

CHAMBLISS: Christina, I know the work you're doing in Puerto Rico and the research you're doing into equity in DH is really important. Does that factor into the vision you

have for CEDAR in a particular way? Is it an amplification of that work? A clarification in some ways, or are there spaces you want to really cultivate in terms of your work and how CEDAR can be a part of that? Talk a little bit about your vision for what CEDAR could be.

BOYLES: Yeah, I think in many ways the work I'm doing in Puerto Rico has been informed a lot by the conversations we've had as a group [like] talking about ethical strategies for building digital infrastructure and working with groups. I'm working on a project called the Maria Memory Bank, which collects stories of Puerto Ricans' experiences during and after Hurricane Maria and is now going to be expanding to include stories of the Guinea earthquakes, which occurred on the South half of the main island, and of COVID-19. That project tries to work with community organizations on the ground that were able to enact disaster response strategies quickly and effectively. It works with them to document and preserve the kind of materials they created, so that could be [the] strategies and pamphlets they handed out to community members or that were within that organization itself for guiding principles, as well as hearing oral stories from members of those groups about their experiences.

One of the greatest things I've learned through working with that project is that infrastructure is often the question we come to last when we work on a digital project, but really should be the one we focus on first. So, I've spent a couple years working with groups and we're constantly reestablishing

terms of consent [and] terms of engagement because it's an open dialogue with horizontal collaborators. We all see each other as equally valuable to weave in [and move] the project forward. To me, those are the exact kinds of conversations we are having with CEDAR and the kind of value we can bring to MSU.

I know this past fall some of us on this team were able to go to the University of Alabama and do what we were calling a CEDAR clinic, so this was kind of a hands-on moment to enact these values. We talked about, particularly in that instance, the use of Omeka S and the ways in which you can enact some of the values we've been talking about through the use of that tool. But I could see a growth [to] that. We could talk about different topics or different tools we're using and the ways we think about the ethics behind those decisions first. That could then inform community groups or other digital humanists in a variety of connected fields on the choices they're making as they start to build these kinds of projects.

CHAMBLISS: Well, I think this idea of consulting and really, just from personal experience, having [the] opportunity to talk with people about the work, especially digital work. We talk a lot about how much we love it [and] we struggle with how we actually support it. I think DH is probably really one of the worst elements of that because it's neither here nor there. It sits as a very public entity that can be attached to a person or institution, so it has a weird kind of traction for administrators. I mean, I have a lot of stories about

conversations with people in charge about DH and they're always good at some level because they care. But the reason they care has a lot to do with public persona, which is attached to a very big question about the value of education and almost always gets you involved in discussions about the decline of the humanities or our neoliberal influence in terms of the academy. At some level, those conversations about what matters in terms of education—what matters in terms of higher ed and its impact on society—they're impossible to get away from, I think. They're just impossible to get away from.

So, to me, yeah, it's really interesting we have an opportunity to think about that and the name they came up with kind of suggests stuff to me. I've always felt [that, for] The Critical Diversity in a Digital Age Research, "Well, you're asking us to ask questions basically." I think that's probably going to continue to be a focus. We'll see how that goes over overtime. We're all living in the current pandemic world so there's a huge question for us, [too]. As a group, it really is this podcast. Probably by the time this gets out, we'll be deep into the summer and hopefully you and your family and all your friends and your institutions and your communities stabilize and we're in a post-Covid world. I'm not going to say go back to normal because I just don't believe in that at this point but, for us, this question of the future is going to be caught up in broader institutional discussions.

Some of the things we want to do—some of the things we can do—are going to be attached to our institution how it

is, as it's going to be for many, many, many academics across the country and around the world. But this was a great opportunity for us as a group. We talked a little bit about CEDAR and, again, to think about when [we] talk about the Digital Humanities, what do we mean? Well, for our group, it means a lot, as you heard. [It means] engaging with the community, thinking about the consequences of technology, thinking about culture in a very particular way. I'm happy my colleagues were willing to take the time to talk a little about themselves, talk about the work as a group, and hopefully you'll be able to hear more about us and find out more about our stuff as we move forward. We don't actually have a website. Usually I ask people, "Oh, if they want to follow up with your work, where do they go?" CEDAR technically doesn't have a website right now, right?

LEON: Not yet.

CHAMBLISS: You don't keep your eyes out. Google MSU and CEDAR. We do stuff.

AROLA: We don't have a website because we're not technology first.

CHAMBLISS: Boom. Drop the mic, walk away. That was a great answer. We're going to end on that answer because that was so awesome. It was so rock hard. It was awesome. Thanks for talking to me, guys.

AROLA: Thank you, Julian. Bye.

LEON: Thank you, Julian.

BOYLES: Thank you.

APPENDIX: NEW DIGITAL WORLDS

This list of digital humanities projects is inspired by the work of those scholars in this volume and the spheres of knowledge in which they engage.

Advocate Recovered

Africa Past & Present

American Panorama

American Religious Sounds Project

Apartheid Heritages

Black Digital Humanities Projects & Resources

Black Perspectives

Black Press Research Collective

Black Quotidian

BrotherMalcolm.Net

Circulating American Magazines

#CharlestonSyllabus

Collaborative Edge

Colored Convention Project

Comics as Data

Community Image Archive

The Communities Conference Audio Archive

Curating at the End of the World

The Digital Library of the Caribbean

DHLC

Electric Marronage

Enslaved

Every Tongue Got to Confess Podcast

Generous Thinking

Hallowed Grounds Project

A History of Central Florida Podcast

Indian Indenture in Trinidad

Mapping Islamophobia

Mapping Police Violence

Matrix

Miami Affordability Project

Minimal Computing

On these Grounds

Omeka Showcase

Publishing Without Walls

The Project on the History of Black Writing

#RacialViolenceSyllabus

Reanimate

RICHES

Rocking the Academy

#SurvDH

TEI

Texas Freedom Colony Project

Third Stone

The Vinegar Hill Project

The Wheaton Digital History Project