A Writing Studies Review of Jim Ridolfo and William Hart-Davidson, editors, *Rhetoric and the Digital Humanities*

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Abstract

This is a review of a collection of essays by rhetoricians and writing studies researchers examining the intersections and affinities between rhetoric and the digital humanities. Edited by Jim Ridolfo and William Hart-Davidson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), this volume is a valuable effort to sustain a conversation across these important fields. The essays that make up this collection are relevant to both titular fields, and to a wider range of writing and English studies scholars.

The twenty-three chapters that make up *Rhetoric and the Digital Humanities*, edited by Jim Ridolfo and William Hart-Davidson, represent the first book-length effort to sustain a conversation around the affinities between these two fields. Though only "rhetoric" is included in the title, this volume really speaks more broadly across writing studies — rhetoric, composition, computers and writing, and technical and professional writing. The theoretical and methodological conundra worked through in the chapters (especially demonstrated through specific project applications) are important first steps toward what will hopefully be a more sustained engagement between the digital humanities and writing studies. On the whole, the volume should be read by the writing studies community, especially as an introduction to the tools and methods employed in the digital humanities that might be of use to their research. [1]

Yet, it might be slightly less obvious at the outset what digital humanists outside of rhetoric and writing studies might gain from reading the volume. Part of the confusion may arise from the tone of the introduction. Citing an increased level of investment in the digital humanities, both within institutions and through external funding agencies, Ridolfo and Hart-Davidson begin their introduction by calling on Matthew Kirschenbaum's "Digital Humanities as/is a Tactical Term" to argue that rhetoric and writing studies scholars can leverage DH in two ways: [2]

> First, we argue that scholars may want to consider selectively redefining digital projects under the umbrella of DH in order to leverage funding, institutional recognition, and extrafield audiences, Second we propose studying the DH job market as an example of how fields in crisis (literary studies and history) are responding to market pressures and, additionally, how rhetoric studies can leverage DH for additional hires. [Ridolfo and Hart-Davidson 2015, 4]

This is pragmatic, to be sure. However, one might imagine beginning this volume not with concerns of funding and disciplinary legitimation, but rather with a vision of how the two titular fields can be more mutually constitutive. Ridolfo and Hart-Davidson work toward this vision at the end of their introduction, especially when they sketch the many lines of inquiry animating the contributions of the volume. The fourteen bullet points that close the introduction indeed look both ways — toward how rhetorical theory can inform DH praxis and how DH methods and theories can be adopted and adapted to rhetoric and writing studies research. [3]

Perhaps the stance Ridolfo and Hart-Davidson begin with is merely reactive to a less productive version of conversations between writing studies and the digital humanities: what Shannon Carter, Jennifer Jones, and Sunchai Hamcumpai call a territorial dispute, pitting computers and writing scholarship against digital humanities scholarship in a struggle over who was here and who said what first [Ridolfo and Hart-Davidson 2015, 36–37]. The pragmatic opening [4]

may be an effort to shake stubborn computer and writing scholars from their defensive positions into a more open dialogue. Some chapters in the volume still stake territorial claims — DH should recognize certain kinds of work as DH scholarship (Sano-Franchini), or rhetoric and writing programs should be cautiously defensive in the face of institutional pressures to conform/contribute to DH initiatives (Walls) — but the stance throughout is more productive, and more reflective of the fourteen rich questions with which Ridolfo and Hart-Davidson end their introduction.

The volume is divided into three sections. In Part One, "Interdisciplinary Connections," the authors take up relations between rhetoric and the digital humanities, seeding new conversations by providing frameworks for digital humanities work (Reid; Sano-Franchini; Anderson and Sayers), examining fruitful ground for collaboration (Brown; Carter, Jones, and Hamcumpai; Eyman and Ball), and advocating for DH methods to be taken up in rhetoric (Johnson). At times, though, there seem to be assumptions or misunderstandings about the digital humanities within the chapters. For example, James Brown Jr. seeks to draw a parallel between the current relations between rhetoric and the digital humanities and past disciplinary struggles within English departments between rhetoric/writing studies and literature faculty. In doing so, Brown paints a monolithic portrait of the digital humanities as literary criticism. His discussion of electronic literature and software studies is compelling: arguing that the "procedural rhetoric" of electronic literature is a potential point of interrogation for rhetoricians to "theorize the relation between production and interpretation" [Ridolfo and Hart-Davidson 2015, 29]. However, his larger point about the disciplinary identity of the digital humanities elides scholarship outside of literary studies (especially history, geography, and the public humanities).

Despite possible mischaracterizations, Part One outlines some of the potentials for rhetorical theory to inform approaches to digital humanities work. In particular, Sano-Franchini's "Cultural Rhetorics and the Digital Humanities: Toward Cultural Reflexivity in Digital Making" is a timely effort that can speak to the transformative and postcolonial digital humanities initiatives of scholars like Roopika Risam, Moya Bailey, and others. Sano-Franchini employs a "cultural rhetorics" approach, which "theorizes how rhetoric and culture are interconnected through a focus on the process by which language, texts, and other discursive practices like performance, embodiment, and materiality create meaning" [Ridolfo and Hart-Davidson 2015, 52]. In so doing, she provides a heuristic for the creation of multimodal texts and the metadata associated with those texts from a cultural rhetorics viewpoint. Her heuristic is also a powerful call for rhetoricians moving toward digital representations to be reflexive to how metadata and underlying data structures can affect projects, often in unforeseen ways. Sano-Franchini's chapter is representative of the best the volume has to offer — contributions that look both toward DH and back upon rhetoric and writing studies to imagine a mutually beneficial relation.

Nathan Johnson's chapter, "Modeling Rhetorical Disciplinarity: Mapping the Digital Network," the last chapter in Part 1, is the first in the volume to take up quantitative methods. Johnson argues for the use of factor mapping in the humanities for tenure and promotion. According to Johnson, with factor mapping, humanities scholars can leverage "one of the more powerful argumentative rhetorics of the twenty-first century — the use of mathematics to support an argument" [Ridolfo and Hart-Davidson 2015, 100]. He closes his chapter with an interesting discussion of metadata: "Even though full-text analysis is possible for humanistic interpretation, perhaps some of the richest types of metadata for factor-mapping projects are the subject headings, classifications, descriptors, and keywords associated with primary and secondary texts. This type of information is frequently generated by human interpretation, usually by librarians or indexers who are hired specifically to interpret the nature of books" [Ridolfo and Hart-Davidson 2015, 105–106]. Here, the humanistic aversion to quantitative data that Johnson identifies is mitigated through the mediation of library metadata practices. Johnson's chapter could certainly provide a starting point for further research and also provides a nice transition to Part Two, "Research Methods and Methodology."

The volume may ultimately be most useful for rhetoricians and writing studies scholars as a primer or introduction to DH methods as they have been (or could be) applied. Johnson's contribution is the first instance of this type of text, and Part 2 of the volume provides a wide range of projects and methodological discussions that anchor the volume. Johnson's focus on quantitative, computer-aided methods is mirrored in contributions by Kennedy and Long, Hart, Hoffman and Waisanen, and Koteyko. Likewise, McNely and Teston's "Tactical and Strategic: Qualitative Approaches to the Digital Humanities" should be required reading for almost any DH researcher, but especially those coming newly to DH from rhetoric and writing studies. Their warning bears quoting in full since the history of methodological

appropriation in rhetoric and composition runs deeply: "rhetorically informed digital humanists should proceed with caution — *doing* DH is not as simple as choosing a digital tool and then combining that tool and tactic with a given methodological approach; indeed, a given tactic may be at odds with one's strategy" [Ridolfo and Hart-Davidson 2015, 112].

Hoffman and Waisanen's is the most introductory of the cluster of essays on computer-aided methods. They provide an overview of the four major functions of computer-aided textual analysis to enable researchers to "make intelligent choices about the appropriate place of textual analysis software in their work" [Ridolfo and Hart-Davidson 2015, 179]. The authors see three potential applications of large-scale text analysis for rhetorical studies: tracing ideographs and memes and their meaning shifts over time (concordances); systematic comparisons of broad features of textual style and tone (dictionary comparisons); and large-scale studies of framing (cluster analyses) [Ridolfo and Hart-Davidson 2015, 180–81]. By delimiting the limitations and potential contributions of textual analysis for rhetoric, Hoffman and Waisanen trace a rough topography which is brought into focus by the more project-based chapters of Kennedy and Long, Hart, and Koteyko.

Kennedy and Long highlight the usefulness of a "quantitative, data-driven inquiry" method for qualitative authorship studies by mining Wikipedia [Ridolfo and Hart-Davidson 2015, 148]. They also point to versioning software programs like Git and Subversion that trace the iterative development of collaboratively-authored texts (among other things, like pieces of software). Looking to what Ed Finn has called "digital traces" [Finn 2013, 4], or those data (incidentally) left behind through online processes, Kennedy and Long seem to be just scratching the surface of what kinds of data could be useful to rhetoric and writing studies scholars.

Hart, on the other hand, lauds one particular method – sentiment analysis – and one particular tool – DICTION – as relevant to rhetorical research. Hart briefly discusses some findings of DICTION, a proprietary, commercial text analysis tool, which, he admits, are not shocking unless "one remembers that they were unearthed by a machine" [Ridolfo and Hart-Davidson 2015, 161]. Perhaps the most useful of Hart's contributions here is to temper what he calls the positivistic and humanistic overreactions to automated text analysis [Ridolfo and Hart-Davidson 2015, 154]. Recalling the work of Jerome McGann and Stephen Ramsay (deformative/algorithmic criticism), Hart argues that DICTION, by employing a bag-of-words approach to documents, can "make the text strange" in ways that readers are unlikely to do on their own [Ridolfo and Hart-Davidson 2015, 158]. For her contribution, Koteyko critiques text analysis programs like DICTION as "often of little value to scholars of rhetoric owing to the decontextualized nature of results" [Ridolfo and Hart-Davidson 2015, 184]. Her focus on the corpus-assisted discourse analysis attends to the social (and networked) aspects of a text in ways that rhetoricians coming from an ethnographic background may find more compelling than Hart's automated text analysis.

In a slight departure from automated and computer-assisted analysis, Boyle's "Low Fidelity in High Definition: Speculations on Rhetorical Editions" takes on scholarly markup and digital editions: topics rarely discussed in rhetoric and writing studies writ large (even in computers and writing, the subfield that shares the most obvious affinities to the digital humanities). As such his chapter is an important initial foray into this long-standing branch of DH work. Boyle argues that literary digital editions in DH privilege a "fidelity to texts and interpretation" while a rhetorical edition would "re/construct texts as dynamic situations, confusing the primary, secondary and tertiary" [Ridolfo and Hart-Davidson 2015, 132]. Boyle's understanding of digital editions created in DH comes largely from Stephen Ramsay's algorithmic criticism, but he also mentions Jerome McGann's "idea of radiant textuality" [Ridolfo and Hart-Davidson 2015, 132]. It is surprising, then, that Boyle ascribes such stability and fidelity to digital critical editions. One can see the theory of a dynamic and unstable text Boyle lauds as uniquely rhetorical in Jerome McGann's "The Rationale of Hypertext," originally written in the mid-1990s and republished in his 2001, *Radiant Textuality*. McGann writes,

> Unlike a traditional edition, a hypertext is not organized to focus attention on one particular text or set of texts. It is ordered to disperse attention as broadly as possible. Of course it is true that every particular hypertext at any particular point in time will have established preferred sets of arrangements and orderings, and these could be less, or more, decentralized. The point is that the hypertext, unlike the book, encourages greater decentralization of design. Hypertext provides the

means for establishing an indefinite number of "centers," and for expanding their number as well as altering their relationships. One is encouraged not so much to find as to make order — and then to make it again and again, as established orderings expose their limits. [McGann 2004, 71]

McGann is not claiming to have achieved this decentered text, and even closes the chapter with a recognition that, in presentational interfaces, the ideal is undermined and that future research should "search for ways to implement, at the interface level, the full dynamic — and decentering — capabilities of these new tools" [McGann 2004, 74]. Here, then, is where *The Quinttilian Project*, Boyle's nascent case study of a rhetorical edition, and rhetorical theory more generally may intervene. Boyle's provisional wireframe is an important first step toward the development of a dynamic user interface for a digital edition that does resist a "stable center from which texts and reading emanate and to which readings return" [Ridolfo and Hart-Davidson 2015, 132]. *The Quinttilian Project* will be important for rhetoricians to watch as it develops — is this a viable form of scholarship for rhetoric and writing studies? Can rhetorical editions be useful for student-authored corpora?

Taken wholly, Part Two of the volume seems much more directed at rhetoric and writing studies researchers just beginning to explore the theories and methods of the digital humanities than the other two parts of the volume. Given the extensive focus on multimodal compositions in Part One and Part Three, Part Two retains a surprising textual bias, especially in discussions of computer-aided analysis. This bias may be expected, but it does elide parallel work in large-scale image analysis [Manovich 2012] and mapping projects [Bodenhamer et al. 2010]. This may be why I perceived a disconnect between the chapters adapting DH/computational methods to rhetoric studies and the chapters proceeding from rhetorical theory to inform DH praxis.

Part 3 of the volume, "Future Trajectories," is anchored by a cluster of chapters dealing with archives and historiography. These chapters are of particular interest to rhetoric and composition scholars. As the recent *College Composition and Communication* special issue on Research Methodologies shows, archival research and archive building are important topics in rhetoric and composition.[1] The chapters in this volume extend many of these conversations with particular interest in digital archives and historiography.

In her chapter, Potts argues that, in the rush to build archives, we have privileged data over user experience. She calls for archives that are "focused on engagement and outreach with the public" through rhetoricians engaging in DH projects as "user advocates, experience architects, and participant-centered researchers" [Ridolfo and Hart-Davidson 2015, 255]. Toward this end she discusses three elements of user-centered design that can serve as a heuristic for digital archive builders: people, purpose, content [Ridolfo and Hart-Davidson 2015, 259–260]. Graban, Ramsey-Tobienne, and Myers also speak directly to rhetoricians who would be digital archivists. They underscore the recursive, dynamic, and political processes of preservation *and* dissemination necessarily involved in digitization. They suggest a methodology of invention to "enact the kind of intervention" we may seek in historiographic projects.

In a slight departure, Rice and Rice describe ephemeral archival production as a performative pedagogical strategy, creating *digital archivists* [Ridolfo and Hart-Davidson 2015, 251], rather than digital archives. This shift in focus is twofold: first it refigures the object of study from the stable (or not) archive to the network of associations arising from the archival act. This focus recalls Boyle's argument that rhetoricians should concern themselves less with what a text is than with what a text does. Second, the chapter reflects on pedagogical goals and outcomes in a way that is not often made explicit in the collection. Along with the contribution of Rice and Rice, several chapters in the collection should be of great interest to compositionists or rhetoricians concerned with the teaching of rhetoric of/through technology.

Glaser and Micciche, in their chapter "Digitizing English," reflect on lessons learned from leading an introductory DH course as newcomers to DH themselves. Their insights call attention to the new requirements of graduate education in the face of conservative English departments. On the whole, their recommendations are not revolutionary, but their narrative of coming to them *through* engagement with DH is compelling. Chapters by Walls and Brooks, Lindgren, and Warner are useful for Writing Program Administrators and K-16 teachers/administrators, respectively. These chapters form a triptych in Part 3, addressing pedagogical, curricular and institutional promises and challenges.

Reading thematically across the volume, there are three other chapters that are more implicit in their pedagogical

implications, yet may be of particular interest to compositionists and rhetoricians working and teaching in writing studies programs. The contribution by Anderson and Sayers is one such chapter. By calling attention to the layered materiality of compositions (including the composition of their chapter), Anderson and Sayers negotiate a more complex view of digital compositions and composing practices that may blur disciplinary lines — between, "digital humanities, digital rhetoric, media studies, textual studies, and electronic literature, for example" [Ridolfo and Hart-Davidson 2015, 83], by enabling critical reflection on communicative practice. Pedagogically, their focus on "composing through — not just about — digital materials and networked culture" [Ridolfo and Hart-Davidson 2015, 84] may have implications for what teachers ask students to do in multimodal (and multimedia) writing courses.

Similarly, chapters by Ballentine and Stolley can each be read pedagogically. Ballentine recognizes that true understanding and engagement with new media requires new kinds of literacy and engagement that exceeds merely the presentational, interface level of digital objects. Ballentine calls on Ian Bogost's "procedural literacy" to argue for code-level literacy to become "endemic to the digital humanities" [Ridolfo and Hart-Davidson 2015, 278], while he simultaneously recognizes that the humanities is not, and should not become, computer science. That Ballentine, like Anderson and Sayers, toes disciplinary lines is unsurprising. Stolley similarly navigates in the space between humanities and computer science as he argues compellingly for research *through* programming-as-writing, for programming as a genuine form of humanistic inquiry [Ridolfo and Hart-Davidson 2015, 268–269]. Ballentine and Stolley are convincing in establishing rhetoric as a disciplinary home for coding and code literacy, and their adaptation of computer science theories and methods joins a venerable tradition in composition and rhetoric of looking to other fields for methodological invigoration. These implicitly pedagogical chapters share a focus on doing as a way of knowing, a focus long embraced by writing studies as well as the digital humanities. This, ultimately, may be fruitful ground for the more mutually constitutive relationship between rhetoric and the digital humanities that does not find its way into Ridolfo and Hart-Davidson's introduction.

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Taken as the beginning of a conversation, *Rhetoric and the Digital Humanities* is an important collection. The affinities between the digital humanities and rhetoric and writing studies are numerous, varied, and brimming with potential for mutual collaboration. Though the volume, as signaled by Ridolfo and Hart-Davidson's introduction, may be more explicitly aimed at rhetoric and writing studies scholars in their disciplinary homes, many chapters speak to the nascent possibilities for rhetorical theory to animate our approaches to digital humanities projects, especially at the level of data representation. The influence of writing studies, too, can be a useful bridge to thinking about our pedagogical frameworks and approaches. One hopes that the big tent of the digital humanities is capacious enough for rhetoric and writing studies scholars to be included, and that we can avoid the territorial disputes of which Carter, Jones, and Hamcumpai warn us. *Rhetoric and the Digital Humanities* is a step in that direction.

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Notes

[1] See *College Composition and Communication* volume 64.1 (September 2013), especially Gaillet; McKee and Porter; Carter and Conrad; Rice and Rice.

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