Pedagogical Entryways into Digital Humanities: A Review of Linda K. Hughes and Sarah R. Robbins' *Teaching Transatlanticism* (Edinburgh University Press, 2015)

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Abstract

This review of Linda K. Hughes and Sarah R. Robbins' *Teaching Transatlanticism* considers the representation of digital humanities in a literary studies pedagogical anthology. Hughes and Robbins position digital humanities methodology as the future of pedagogical research in the field of transatlanticism, compiling digital humanities scholarship into a section titled "Envisioning Digital Transatlanticism." *Teaching Transatlanticism* thus illustrates the ways literary scholars are crossing over into digital humanities research, and how literary scholars more versed in the digital humanities are welcoming new participants.

Scholars of transatlantic literature are not fans of disciplinary and national boundaries. We are more comfortable aligning ourselves with discussions that take up literary exchanges from all sides of the Atlantic rather than adhering to the nationalist – either British or American – coherent, tightly sealed literary canons. Boundary-crossing and open geographic exchange can become a challenge, however, when setting out to plan a course on early transatlantic literature, or even to fulfill institutional and departmental requirements for what counts as literary studies. Linda K. Hughes and Sarah R. Robbins take up this challenge in their edited collection, *Teaching Transatlanticism: Resources for Teaching Nineteenth-Century Anglo-American Print Culture*, published by Edinburgh University Press. *Teaching Transatlanticism* aims to reposition the way literary scholars teach nineteenth century transatlantic literature. The anthology offers a selection of essays from literary scholars who cross genre, discipline, and national boundaries in their pedagogical methods. Though *Teaching Transatlanticism* is not a text primarily devoted to digital humanities (DH) scholarship, Hughes and Robbins encourage readers to look towards DH for pedagogical methodologies. Of the anthology's six sections and nineteen chapters, only three short chapters – grouped together at the end of the text in a section entitled "Envisioning Digital Transatlanticism" – take up digital humanities pedagogy. This may initially seem to demote the text's applicability for scholars more versed in digital humanities discourse. However, what *Teaching Transatlanticism* offers DH scholarship is insight into the ways literary scholars are crossing the bridge into DH work, and withal how literary scholars more versed in DH are welcoming new participants. Because, as Karen Kilcup argues, "composing an anthology creates a miniature canon," we can better understand the ways that DH scholarship is woven into more traditional literary studies methods by reading *Teaching Transatlanticism* as a case study of the literary canon [Kilcup 2000, 37]. From this perspective, pedagogy is an accessible passageway into DH methodology for literary scholars.

Hughes and Robbins explain in their introduction that by compiling *Teaching Transatlanticism* with the digital pedagogy section towards the end of the text, they are able to "end by looking ahead to the possibilities opened by digital humanities" [Hughes and Robbins 2015, 10]. While DH pedagogy is certainly not a new field, Hughes and Robbins recognize that many of their readers may be new to DH scholarship, and may also be unsure of how to become acquainted with the field. The editors promote a kind of DH-curiosity in their audience by adopting an inviting, optimistic rhetoric, and by invoking terms like "envisioning," "possibilities," and "looking ahead." DH scholars are not unfamiliar with this type of discourse nor would they dispute placing digital humanities at the forefront of innovative scholarly practices in the humanities. Such inviting rhetoric celebrating DH as the future reinforces what Bethany Nowviskie

referred to as "the eternal September of the Digital Humanities." For Nowviskie, "the eternal September" tension within the DH community describes a field that is growing in popularity and quickly gaining newly interested scholars, but that also has a long history of scholarship often going unrecognized [Nowviskie 2010]. As a relative newcomer to the field myself, I am interested in pedagogical methods that aid new scholars in joining the conversation, and in the tension that arises when transitioning from DH novice to DH expert.

Turning to the "Envisioning Digital Transatlanticism" section of the anthology, I want to draw attention to the ways both the editors and authors of these short chapters situate digital pedagogy as necessary to literary studies. This "Envisioning" section promotes DH scholarship, targeting an audience who may be less convinced by the direct link between transatlanticism and DH. Even the editors' use of the word "envisioning" in the title suggests a persuasive, advocating tone.

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The first essay in the "Envisioning" section of the anthology, Alison Chapman's "Transatlantic Mediations: Teaching Victorian Poetry in the New Print Media," convincingly argues that DH pedagogy is valuable in a literature classroom. For Chapman, digital pedagogy is especially useful when teaching a transatlantic literature course because transatlanticism "is so invested in mediation" [Hughes and Robbins 2015, 220] Chapman explains teachers' investment in mediation by pointing to the ways that "transatlantic texts work within different categories (of the nation), unsettling unitary definitions and emphasising dynamism and context" [Hughes and Robbins 2015, 220]. Transatlantic print culture is heavily mediated, and "digital pedagogy offers the tools to examine the telesthesia of transatlantic print as a circulation of texts, seen artificially and yet illuminatingly up close through the constructed lens of the digital object and the digital tool" [Hughes and Robbins 2015, 221]. Beyond the editors' motioning towards DH as the future, Chapman explicitly argues that the digital should be a universal component in literary studies courses: "it is my contention that critiques of digital platforms, tools, and methods belong in every higher education literary course to nurture students' digital literacy" [Hughes and Robbins 2015, 216]. Chapman thus theorizes the benefits of digital pedagogy in a transatlantic literature course as twofold: digital mediation helps students understand the circulation and dissemination of transatlantic print culture, and students' digital literacy skills are further developed by engaging critically with digital methods.

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Following Chapman's chapter is Erik Simpson's "Digital Transatlanticism: An Experience of and Reflections on Undergraduate Research in the Humanities." Like Chapman, Simpson argues that DH methodology is particularly applicable to transatlanticism, citing several of his undergraduate students' research projects in creating a bibliographic database, *The Transatlantic 1790s*. Simpson argues, "In humanities computing...we can construct tools that achieve a kind of transatlantic perspective unavailable to scholars whose academic world is shaped by the conventional boundary marker of the Atlantic...we can also create online environments that place these new insights in the context of transatlantic theory" [Hughes and Robbins 2015, 232]. Simpson's essay is especially enlightening because he provides details into the specifics of his undergraduate students' projects, such as one student who "investigated debates about marriage in the 1790s" and another who researched discourse on "physiognomy, figurations of the eye, and diagnoses such as hysteria" [Hughes and Robbins 2015, 229]. Simpson credits his students both in his chapter as well as within each entry in *The Transatlantic 1790s* database. Simpson's research can thus serve as a model for both incorporating DH methods into transatlantic literature classrooms, as well as for best practices in crediting and showcasing student research.

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Hughes and Robbins present *Teaching Transatlanticism* alongside a website of the same name – teachingtransatlanticism.tcu.edu which is the subject of the final chapter in the "Envisioning Digital Transatlanticism" – section of the anthology. Hughes and Robbins introduce the site as an online extension of the conversation started by the anthology's contributors: "We anticipate...that an array of voices will join our curricular conversations via the website associated with this volume" [Hughes and Robbins 2015, 10]. The WordPress site includes two components that solicit user participation: teaching materials listed under a page titled "Teaching Resources," and a discussion forum listed under a page titled "Conversations" open to new users to comment and create new threads. The "Teaching Resources" page, which lists syllabi, lesson plans, and graduate student exam lists, suggests users "submit additional resources to the website editor for possible inclusion in this section" and provides a link to the discussion forum on the "Conversations" page. Currently, the teaching resource contributors and forum participants are mostly individuals

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associated with the *Teaching Transatlanticism* anthology. While it is useful to be able to access syllabi and lesson plans from the anthology's authors, the small circle of users on the "Teaching Transatlanticism" website points to the challenge of soliciting and maintaining an active user community online, based around such a specific field. In her research on participatory interface design and digital editions, Amanda Visconti explains that her work requires her to conceptualize the range of definitions of "inclusivity" online: "as web design that is universally accessible to users; as invitation to participation; as scaffolding to make a site not only welcoming, but usable by new community members" [Visconti 2014]. For Visconti, soliciting and including new users on her site (a digital edition of Joyce's *Ulysses*, InfiniteUlysses.com) requires not just building the necessary collaborative components, but also seeking out user feedback in the building and design process.

In his essay, "Twenty-First-Century Digital Publics and Nineteenth-Century Transatlantic Public Spheres," Tyler Branson, the site's creator, employs public sphere theory, citing Michael Warner and Nancy Fraser, to think through digital collaborative spaces and the types of publics summoned by such a digital commons. For Branson and his collaborators, the "Teaching Transatlanticism" site "is the culmination not just of a book and digital humanities project on transatlantic teaching, but also a reflective process on how publics form and operate" [Hughes and Robbins 2015, 238]. His essay relies on public sphere theory as it enables him to "challenge...the concept of a universal public in favour of multiple *publics* or *counter*publics" as he speculates that the types of users participating on the site will be "a collection of overlapping yet distinctive human teaching voices from all over the world" [Hughes and Robbins 2015, 238–240]. Like Visconti, Branson is thinking carefully about how users are included within the site, and about the site's accessibility as a "digital commons" for a wide range of academic users [Hughes and Robbins 2015, 240]. However, in its current iteration, the "Teaching Transatlanticism" website does not quite attain the aspirations Branson articulates in his essay, as the site still lacks outside user participation and collaboration. The disjuncture between Branson and his collaborators' ambitions for "Teaching Transatlanticism" and the present manifestation of the site highlights the necessity of scholarly organizations like NINES (Networked Infrastructure for Nineteenth-Century Electronic Scholarship) which peer-review digital projects and provide support for scholars conducting digital research. [7]

Teaching Transatlanticism reveals that pedagogy is an encouraging realm in which literary scholars can be introduced to digital humanities methodology. The authors in this volume help us understand the connections between transatlanticism, mediation, and the digital, and their work demonstrates an opening for further conversation. If digital humanities is indeed the future of transatlantic studies that the editors of this anthology "envision," we can perhaps imagine a digital companion edition to this text focused on digital transatlantic pedagogy – one that calls forth a vibrant online community of transatlantic scholars. It seems that users are more drawn to online communities where they can annotate texts and collaborate on projects, rather than the model of the often neglected static forum or comment box. [8]

Works Cited

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