

DH2018: A Space to Build Bridges

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Abstract

In June 2018, the Digital Humanities annual conference (DH2018) was held in the Global South for the first time. This conference report offers perspectives from two graduate students who attended the conference.

Introduction

In June 2018, the Digital Humanities annual conference (DH2018) was held in the Global South for the first time. The hosts of the conference, the Red de Humanidades Digitales (RedHD), La Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) and El Colegio de México (Colmex), created an event that was refreshingly diverse in languages and perspectives that reflected the cultural richness of the conference's location. Its theme, "Puentes / Bridges", emphasized a reexamination of ongoing trends in archival work and academic work, with the hope of moving digital humanities a step toward inclusivity, accountability, and decolonization. DH2018 was the first time, as well, that the international DH conference featured keynote addresses delivered by two women of color working in the Global South: Janet Chávez Santiago and Schuyler K. Esprit, an indigenous language activist, engaged primarily beyond the academy, and a scholar of Caribbean studies, respectively. Chávez Santiago's opening keynote addressed the conference's themes by using digital humanities to bridge the gap between the documentation of modern languages and indigenous languages, particularly Zapotec. She noted how "being digital means being tied to an ancestral world" [Santiago 2018]. This strongly depicts what most of the conference's programming aimed to address when highlighting minority-centered digital projects and decolonizing digital spaces over the course of its four days (please see the conference program for more details). In her closing keynote, Esprit echoed these themes, talking about how digital humanists can collaborate with their communities to confront global narratives about climate change, and its locally-experienced effects, using methods of "technological disobedience" and community-sourced narratives [Esprit 2018].

Other journals in the humanities have published conference reviews that attempt to amalgamate the work represented at meetings in those journals' fields. *ESQ*, for example, publishes an annual "The Year in Conferences" feature, in which 19th-century scholars of American Literature and Culture who attended the year's meetings come together to relate an overview their happenings [Ach et al. 2018]. In the weeks leading up to the DH2018 conference, Northeastern University Professors Élika Ortega and Ryan Cordell secured funding from the NULab for Texts, Maps, and Networks at Northeastern University to support a similar effort for Digital Humanities Quarterly. Two graduate students were funded to attend DH2018, document their experiences, and write a report under Ortega and Cordell's mentorship. [Editors' note: DHQ welcomes proposals for reports on other conferences in digital humanities; please contact the editors at editors@digitalhumanities.org.]

Writing as the two graduate students who attended the conference, we hope to reflect on the conference's events in order to narrate and analyze notable trends in the concepts and techniques that emerged. We come from the History and English departments at Northeastern University and are second-year and fourth-year PhD students, respectively. Having been involved with the NULab's Graduate Certificate Program in Digital Humanities and various digital projects on campus, we offer different perspectives from these standpoints in the University's digital humanities community. We

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engage in personal reflection and evaluation, as well as journalistic reporting and synthesis to determine where the field seems to be headed and where it may need improvement.

Molly Nebiolo

As a historian of the early modern Atlantic world, I was constantly impressed by the incorporation of Latin American and non-western cultures into the conference program. No other conference that I have attended thus far in my academic career was structured like this. From the mixed language panels in English and Spanish, to completely non-English panels, I had the experience of being challenged with my knowledge of Spanish to understand and converse in what is, for me, a second language. I kept reflecting on the constant inclusivity of these panels to non-Spanish speakers: the encouragement to whisper to one another for translation, the motivation to speak up if something needed to be repeated or reworded. These moments left me thinking back to any other conference I have attended and how inclusivity of multiple languages for presenting academic work had never been present at the conference or presentation level for non-English speakers. It is commonly assumed that English is the only language to be used at an international academic conference. DH2018 directly challenged that (all presenters were encouraged to use the Translation Toolkit), humbling me as someone who never had to confront this truth before.

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In the English language panels, the themes that repeatedly appeared were those of decolonization, indigeneity, and sustainability of projects. For my own work both as a historian and my work for the digital humanities program at NU, I gravitated towards panels on mapping and discussing the archive as a form of representation, like “Maps, Networks and Data”, “Mapas y Territorios”, and “Bridging Divides, Colonial Archives”. My reflections on these panels cover only a small segment of themes that were discussed as a whole at DH2018. In one of the earlier panels I attended, “Bridging Cultures through Mapping Practices: Space and Power in Asia and America”, there was constant confrontation of the idea of creating a spatial temporal narrative, one that GIS tools could help define with georeferenced layers of data on a location placed over areas of geographical space. The panel covered mostly spatial understandings of Shanghai and Korean geographies that underlined the difficulties of defining space in a digital manner. There are discrepancies in what is present on a map, how things are defined, and whether or not these two rhetorics are explicit with keeping the integrity of diverse places. By noting the challenges and realities of creating digital maps, Cecile Armand, Christian Henriot, and Sora Kim in particular created discussion with their presentations, instead of solely presenting on aesthetically pleasing maps and data [Armand et al. 2018].

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Other mapping panels, like “Mapas y Territorios”, continued to ask this kind of question, as well. How can a digital snapshot of a place or space best represent the cultural layers, struggles, and interactions of boundaries and the people who made them? How important are boundaries in the construction of a digital archive around mapping? How can we make the understanding of boundaries more accurate to the complicated histories that they hold? These inquiries ran deep into the decolonizing panels, like “Bridging Divides, Colonial Archives”, because there was this repetitive reflection on how to be more representative of non-white histories, voices and stories.

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The panelists over the course of the conference tried to grapple with their own projects to better understand how digital humanities tools (mapping tools, archive creating sites, network analyses) can be harnessed to incorporate decolonized voices, particularly in “Bridging Divides, Colonial Archives” and “Social Justice, Data Curation, and Latin American & Caribbean Studies”. As someone who is routinely confronting the white history of the early Americas and struggles to find a comparable indigenous perspective, I was comforted that these spaces were made at DH2018 to discuss these decolonizing questions. However, the sheer size of the conference created many compressed panel sessions that made it difficult to digest and participate fully in such discussions. Commonly with four or even five presentations condensed into an hour and a half slot, many of these rich presentations felt more like flash-talks and less like a fully formed action plan or set of ideas to answer the questions they raised. There were so many people vying for time to present and make their voices heard that I left the conference full of thought-provoking questions, than real clarity on how the field could build bridges to fix the problem of the colonized archive and the digitization of white narrative.

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There were some spaces that were able to cultivate these discusses outside of the presentation spaces. On the first night, there was a lively reception after the keynote speech that was a space for many introductions and discussions

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around upcoming panels, and a similar event abutted the end of the conference for last minute exchange of emails, questions, and networking. However, the poster session and the mid-week fiesta were the two instances where networking and conversation seemed richest. Two conference rooms were sandwiched with posters and presenters, which created a labyrinth-like environment for participants to weave through and absorb. I found that many of the posters^[1] focused on early-career and early-stage projects that were aiming to produce databases or markup languages for underrepresented cultures and languages in the digital humanities field, like “Hispanic 18th Connect”, “Codicological Study of pre High Tang Documents from Dunhuang: An Approach using Scientific Analysis Data”, and “Devochdelia: el Diccionario Etimológico de las Voces Chilenas Derivadas de Lenguas Indígenas Americanas de Rodolfo Lenz en versión digital” (all from session 1). Another major theme was the fact that most of these graduate-student led presentations strongly pointed out ways they were hoping to extend and sustain their projects. In a Digital History class at Northeastern University led by Ben Schmidt, we ended the course grappling with this issue of sustainability of an adolescent digital humanities project on the web. How this situation is addressed is a part of how the field of digital humanities progresses into the future. It was great to see these conversations proliferate elsewhere. The fiesta was another space in which these conversations seemed to expound. Situated in the plaza of the Universidad del Claustro de Sor Juana, the event reverberated with the hum of conversations about the field, the torrential rain of a passing storm, toasts over tequila shots, and music from the mariachi band. While the conference presentations were the backbone to DH2018, it was the spaces for networking and conversation, like those of the poster session, keynote reception and fiesta, that fleshed out this experience for participants.

There is significance in hosting the first Global South digital humanities conference in Mexico City. The clashing and blending of cultures to create a stratum of various ethnicities and traditions over centuries has pushed the urgency of decolonizing academic, digital perspectives at the conference. The various language presentations, the emphasis of getting comfortable in these uncomfortable non-English spaces, and the Mexican culture that permeated the conference were necessary to make this conference as successful as it was. As a historian, I appreciated the integration of the commonly marginalized voices- as presenters, actors in the digital projects, and with their languages being digitally standardized. As a student just entering the world of digital humanities, the conference left me with hope that the field is progressing quickly in these aspects. There seemed to be plenty of participants, particularly those early in their careers, that will hold the annual conference accountable to make these themes sustainable in the future. The crowded schedule of many of the panels I sat in on did result in hurried and cramped presentations. In future conferences, it would be interesting to see if the conference could diversify the types of panels that are held, so there could be more room for discussion during the conference itself. For example, the History of Science Society’s annual conference offers a selection of one-hour long discussion round-tables around midday, lunchtime talks, and evening graduate student-led colloquia on field-specific pedagogy in addition to poster panels, classic presentations, and keynote receptions. This allowed for more opportunities for presenters to speak outside of the classic presentation style, and varied the schedule for many of the attendees, as well. Overall, I found DH2018 to be a promising turning point for how I understood and experienced digital humanities and academic conferences.

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Gregory Palermo

As a digital humanist working in the US-based field of writing and rhetoric, I came to DH2018’s emphasis on bridging communities with certain disciplinary histories in mind. My research at the time, while writing my comprehensive exams, was on the rhetoric of disciplinarity: specifically, how members of fields reshape the stories^[2] they tell about themselves by whom and how they cite in the same space. Both digital humanities and writing studies have long traditions of using digital tools and methods for research and pedagogy, while attending to their processes and ethics. The two fields, however, have remained largely insulated from one another, despite their resonant work and common values [Ridolfo and Hart-Davidson 2015] [Palermo 2017]. The exclusion of writing studies until fairly recently from “big tent DH” has inspired some hard feelings in the former, along with an accompanying impulse to draw boundaries around areas of research and claim these academic “territories” [Carter et al. 2015].

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Since DH2018 was the first international digital humanities conference to be held in the Global South, the conference’s planning materials drew particular critical attention to the borders dividing and constructing geopolitical territories. This

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frame for the conference was further amplified by its location, in Mexico City, and timing, just after news broke about the separation and detention of families at the US/Mexico border. As local conference organizer Isabel Galina noted in her opening address, now is the time to build bridges rather than walls, and our field can and should apply digital methods to impact international events. Conference attendees had the opportunity to intervene in the incident as part of two hackathons — held by Alex Gil and Roopika Risam and generously supported, with food and time, by the HASTAC community^[3] — that contributed to an early version of the Separados / Torn Apart project.^[4] The project's initial visualization of the infrastructural and financial footprints of US Immigration and Customs Enforcement was the product of volunteer^[5] rapid-response prototyping, work undertaken the week or so immediately preceding the conference. The project's visualizations and accompanying reflections narrate this team's numerous rhetorical and ethical decisions: choices surrounding the access, curation, and reontologization of data, as well as its representation for multiple audiences and purposes.

While these hackathons were not a central or initially scheduled part of DH2018, I begin my discussion of the conference by mentioning them because they epitomize the conference's focus on boundary-drawing and -crossing in all its forms: to quote the conference web site, of borders "cultural, technological, political, and ideological".^[6] The coming together of project's collaborators to work on a matter of emergent concern exemplifies a focus on local intervention that we increasingly value. This type of intervention requires literacies that draw from multiple experiences and backgrounds. Building a bridge, to invoke a term used in decolonial theory, "enunciates" the communities being bridged, rather than obscuring their difference under a totalizing tent. The choice of bridge-building by the conference organizers as a metaphor also — even more importantly, to my mind — calls our attention to the practical concerns of that work. If there were a single defining feature of the papers given and discussions happening across DH2018's concurrent sessions, it was a focus on how academics might responsibly use digital methods to redraw boundaries.

A panel on "Cultural Representation" in digital work (PS-04) grappled with the role of researchers in serving the people with whom we are collaborating or whom we are studying. Presenters on their work with Somali, Haitian, Filipinx, and Latinx communities called attention to the time- and labor-intensive efforts to build a rapport and trust with them, in light of the context-dependent, multidirectional power differentials between the academy and the public. As Anelise H. Shrout put it succinctly on the conference's Twitter backchannel, a common sentiment was that digital humanists "are beholden to the communities we work with" [Shrout 2018]. A panel on "Digital Decolonizations" convened by Allison Margaret Bigelow emphasized a need for "data sovereignty" in scholarship involving indigenous communities, asking who on the ground controls access to data and the purposes to which it is put (PS-24). In PS-04, Mahnke noted that some data should simply not be digitally accessible, a reality with which digital humanists should make peace despite our culture of openness [Mahnke 2018]. It was promising to see her draw, at a digital humanities conference, from rhetoric's body of reflective scholarship on community-engaged research,^[7] her discussion of her work with a Filipinx community, sustaining their stories in digital spaces, signals a new generation of work that bridges rhetoric with DH.

Other conversations reflected on how we are beholden to our communities of colleagues and students. Deb Verhoeven, in her talk about using network analysis techniques to locate "Gender Offenders" in Australian digital research funding networks (Panel LP-13), termed a shift in digital research from mere "counting" to "accountability". For Verhoeven, the value of digital (and especially quantitative) methods is "diagnostic": to address and *change* the academic landscape in front of us as we describe its crises of representation and access [Verhoeven et al. 2018]. Brandon T. Locke, in a panel on undergraduate digital pedagogy (SP-05), broadened our usual understanding of access — e.g., to platforms and infrastructures — to include access to critical data literacy. Locke argued that it is not enough to make data available or point students to it without also teaching them about how to understand and manipulate its structures. Adding to Taylor Elyse Mills' numerous and lucid recommendations for supporting undergraduate research in the classroom [Mills 2018], Locke related his decision to give his students uncleaned data, exposing them in the classroom to the "messy labor" we know to go into data visualization and analysis. Locke's poster on his effort to promote "Civic Data Literacy" with an "Endangered Data Week" joined multiple posters, in the conference's two poster sessions, on related topics, such as data ontologies and linked open data (Locke). Data sustainability was a topic, as well, on a panel about "Project Afterlives" and "Research Data for Pedagogical Use" (PS-32). Presenter Megan Finn Senseney lamented the scarcity of raw data in a field with so much curated data — her pedagogical solution is to "salt" the data she uses with her students

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Still other conversations stressed the modes by which local interventions can create larger change in the academy. Danica Savonick and Lisa Tagliaferri, as part of a panel on “Sustainability and Institutions” (SP-18), used text analysis techniques to reveal patterns in the purposes for higher education that universities currently articulate in their mission statements [Savonick and Tagliaferri 2018]; their own stated purpose was to provide fodder for “advancing institutional change”.^[8] In a panel addressing Institutional Infrastructures (LP-02), James W. Malazita brought science and technology studies’ understanding of “knowledge structures” and “epistemic structures”, along with Michel de Certeau’s distinction between “strategies” and “tactics” [Certeau 2011, xix], to attend to Matthew Kirschenbaum’s portrayal of “digital humanities” as a “tactical term” [Kirschenbaum 2012] [Malazita, 2018]. A panel on “Precarious Labor” convened by Arianna Ciula (PS-22) generated discussion on how we might tactically encourage and support the scholarship of those in job roles supporting others’ work — roles that universities too often impel us to casualize second to a narrow of production. A particularly productive panel discussion on project management in digital humanities (PS-14) covered the labor and turnover of projects’ largely contingent staff; Micki Kaufman led the charge, there, of providing pragmatic advice for project managers (many of whom are graduate students) and those who employ them. Lisa Rhody and her team’s poster on the “The Digital Humanities Research Institute” at CUNY offered similar infrastructural support, modeling an opportunity for bringing digital humanities education to one’s home campus [Rhody et al. 2018]. Matthew Gold et al. were as focused on getting a sense of people’s ongoing needs for their publishing platform Manifold as they were with presenting its current possibilities [Gold et al. 2018]. Paige C. Morgan reminded us, however, that unbridled openness is not always a virtue within the academy either, drawing attention to the work that goes into data curation and from which others benefit; she conspicuously supports scholars, especially in precarious positions, who choose to keep their datasets initially private while working on them, in order to avoid being digital humanities’ version of “scooped” [Morgan 2018].

Counterpoints like these surfaced an ongoing tension in digital humanities around questions of openness and access: between the productive opportunities that access can bring and our recognition of the differential impact of that access on others. This tension is further complicated when the productive opportunity is, in fact, an opportunity for bridge-building. For example, Jin Gao offered to share her subnational dataset when presenting on her team’s work using analyses of citation and social networks for broadly “Visualizing the DH Community” (LP-20; Gao et al. 2018). Others present at that panel, including Ciula, pointed out that this body of literature from journals published primarily in English represented only a subset of the community [Ciula 2018]. Panel presenter Fabio Ciotti pointed to Domenico Fiormonte’s work [Fiormonte 2017] on the geopolitics of knowledge in digital humanities, using it to critique the North American-centrism of the field’s received disciplinary historiography [Ciotti2018]. Open data, here, could be used in our continual efforts de-center English-speaking digital humanities, as long as we attend to whose prerogative it is to assemble, use, and share the data.

The disproportionate space, especially digital, afforded to English-speaking conference attendees is one that Ernesto Priego quantified in his exploratory analysis of DH2018 tweets [Priego 2018].^[9] Some live tweeters devoted their efforts to translating panel presentations, in addition to providing the synthesis and talkback common to digital humanities conferences (see Ross, et al.). This digital intervention complemented the in-person “whisper[ed]” translation that Molly Nebiolo has noted above among panel attendees. It constituted an effort to somewhat temper the dominance of English in the conference’s archival record,^[10] especially for members of the digital humanities community who could not make it physically to the conference. The ACH bolstered the existing, remotely organized initiatives to facilitate conference attendance: adding to ADHO’s graduate student travel bursaries so more young scholars to travel to experience the conference first-hand, while offering formalized mentorship programs like the Newcomer’s Dinners that pair conference “veterans” with “newbies”. That said, we can continue to use our digital expertises to pluralize the conference’s digital spaces as well as its physical ones — spaces, like this conference review genre, that I hope will provide the means for a more inclusive future for the conference and the field.

Notes

[1] For a full list of posters, see the conference program’s listings of session 1 posters and session 2 posters.

[2] Chávez Santiago's keynote highlighted a Spanish-language pun that portrays storytelling as a mode of "wefting" about a textile's warp, alternatively translated as "plotting" (7:17).

[3] See <https://www.hastac.org/blogs/danicasavonick/2018/07/08/torn-apartseparados-hackathon-hastac-meet-recap>.

[4] See <https://xpmethod.plaintext.in/torn-apart/index.html>.

[5] In addition to Gil and Risam, this initial team included Manan Amed, Moacir P. de Sá Pereira, Sylvia A. Fernández, Merisa Martinez, and Linda Rodriguez. For more information see the project site: <http://xpmethod.plaintext.in/torn-apart/credits.html>.

[6] See the conference site at <https://dh2018.adho.org/en/acerca-de/>.

[7] See, e.g., [Cushman and Monberg 1998].

[8] See a Twitter thread by Aaron R. Hanlon for how university mission statements could be useful for tenured faculty when advocating for their contingent colleagues [Hanlon 2018].

[9] Since it is substantially more difficult and expensive to query the historical Twitter API than collecting tweets at their moment of publication, Priego has promised to publish the dataset he collected once he has anonymized it.

[10] One can access DH2018's twitter backchannel by searching Twitter for "#DH2018" along with the hashtag of a conference panel (e.g., #LP20).

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