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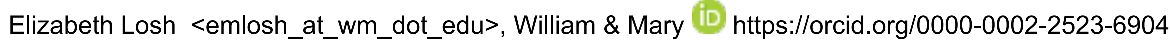
The Fulll Monty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Abstract

Black DH is central rather than peripheral to the field of the digital humanities and challenges the origin stories of humanities computing and its blind spots about data and white supremacy. Unfortunately the same issues about diversity and inclusivity in conferences, professional organizations, and scholarly communication remain unchanged over the decades, and the burden falls on Black and Brown DHers disproportionately.

When I first started presenting at digital humanities events twenty years ago, the field was still called “humanities computing.” My first international conference experience was at “Digital Resources in the Humanities” in 2000. Sessions were held at the University of Sheffield, which had recently been the location of the popular British film *The Full Monty*. The movie had dramatized the plight of unemployed steel workers and their precarity under Thatcherism. Consequently, the conference seemed to me very disconnected from questions of class as well as those of race and ethnicity. In addition to being a very obviously white space in terms of who was in the room at any given moment, there was definitely a sense that the urban landscape outside needed to erased from the consciousness of participants in order to focus on the output of elite institutions and their scrupulous digital annotations of canonical texts.

At the time there was a strong emphasis on the preservation of “cultural heritage” without a lot of reflection about whose heritage was being preserved and why, who would have access to it and how, and who would be curating and interpreting these objects of study in the future. I was very interested in the politics of digitization at the time and how nation-states were rhetorically positioning themselves with millennial enthusiasm as they launched ambitious initiatives for national digital libraries that promised universal access to rare materials connected to a country’s founding myths. I was doing a lot of field work interviewing librarians and visiting archives in the US, France, and the UK, but institutional administrators were very reluctant to let me chat with people actually sitting at digitization machines. I found the outsourcing of labor in this workflow to immigrants or workers in former colonial possessions particularly repugnant. There were often “mistakes” in which a Black or Brown person’s hand would be visible on a digitized page or the insertion of nonstandard language or classification would appear, and I wanted to know about these people and their stories.

In 2000 there was also growing recognition that there would need to be more standardization so that digital humanities projects could be more sustainable and interoperable. Many of the sessions at the Sheffield conference were about TEI, which seemed like a cutting-edge innovation, although it had apparently been around since the eighties. Publishers were also trying to capitalize on subscription database services. I vividly remember a rather clunky demo of JSTOR, which was still in its infancy, and there was also much discussion of Google Books. Yet, no one seemed to be talking about the politics of classification or the exclusionary practices of proprietary corporations, even though they were clearly part of the DH mythology that I was seeing being formalized firsthand.

These early experiences really drew me to seminal work in Black digital humanities that aired issues in the field that were clearly being suppressed. Regardless of their affiliation or status or chosen mode of publication (since blogs were important venues for Black DH), these were the first major critics in the field in my opinion. These were the voices that raised substantive questions about politics, access, participation, labor, prestige, corporate influence, the surveillance

state, and the racist and colonial legacies of supposedly universal standards. By 2010, people like Anna Everett, Beth Coleman, Marisa Parham, and Kim Gallon were also asking fundamental questions about the definition of the digital humanities itself and the limitations of grounding its origin story in corpus linguistics rather than transmedia storytelling, collective world-building, digital activism, or civic media. When I teach seminars or workshops in the digital humanities, I see work by Black and Brown digital humanists as central, and I am perplexed by those who devalue this important corpus of scholarship as peripheral. Jessica Marie Johnson, Moya Bailey, Catherine Knight Steele, Angel David Nieves, Dorothy Kim, and Roopika Risam are always on my syllabi.

Although I would hope that international digital humanities organizations would do more to use their platforms as transnational, multilingual communities of scholarship to elevate Black DH, too often I hear nonsense that reinforces a false “quality vs. diversity” binary among decision makers. Moreover, too often committees and task forces composed of already overworked faculty of color are charged with changing the culture and infrastructure of DH organizations without the means for effecting the unfunded and unresourced mandates that they have been assigned. Having been around for two decades, I have seen multiple restagings of these supposedly good faith efforts. The cast of characters changes, but the problems remain. 5

Instead it might be more useful to invest energies in regional digital humanities organizations that treat access-oriented institutions and communities of color with more respect. For example, Ravynn Stringfield has argued that conferences like “Intentionally Digital, Intentionally Black” and “Race, Memory, and the Digital Humanities” energize graduate students and other emerging scholars because they sustain networks of care and repair. These conferences in which most of the presenters are Black are also connected to particular geographies of shared practice and lived legacies of oppression rooted in space and place that must be addressed by Predominant White Institutions (PWIs). 6

Having taught in the Netherlands and having been part of research groups based in Norway and Germany, I don’t think that these place-based DH approaches should just be the domain of U.S. exceptionalism, even if American truth and reconciliation processes still need to acknowledge the continuing and lasting damage of mass incarceration, redlining, segregation, Jim Crow, and the Transatlantic slave trade in a matrix of material and digital relations. Digital humanities projects everywhere can make space for restorative justice that comes to terms with colonial institutions, racist immigration policies, and ethnic genocides by decentering White voices and opening up opportunities for true collaboration with initiatives led by Black and Brown scholars. 7

Works Cited

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