


My DH Present, Past, & Future

Moya Bailey <moya_dot_bailey_at_northwestern_dot_edu>, Northwestern University  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9018-6261>

Abstract

My Day of DH (Digital Humanities) 2020 included an hour long talk with a social media platform about diversity and inclusion on said platform. Following their initial inquiry, I raised concern around the language of “inclusion,” countering that inclusion implies bringing people into an already existing center. I asked if their BIPOC users really wanted to be included or if they wanted to be allowed to exist on the platform without being disproportionately surveilled. My ability to garner the attention of a social media platform and then critique its work is not something I envisioned for myself when I started out in DH.

My Day of DH (Digital Humanities) 2020 included an hour long talk with a social media platform about diversity and inclusion on said platform. Following their initial inquiry, I raised concern around the language of “inclusion,” countering that inclusion implies bringing people into an already existing center. I asked if their BIPOC users really wanted to be included or if they wanted to be allowed to exist on the platform without being disproportionately surveilled. My ability to garner the attention of a social media platform and then critique its work is not something I envisioned for myself when I started out in DH. 1

As an elder millennial, born in the US, I was an early adopter of multiple digital platforms. I was a high school student who built my own website in HTML and a college student who used LiveJournal and Blogspot to connect with a community of women of color activists and artists who grew up online. I used Ning to create a niche Facebook for quirky Black girls and we used Last.FM, Blip, Friendster, Myspace, and whatever else existed, to make room for ourselves on the internet. We shaped corners of those platforms into little safe havens of connection that allowed us to develop our leftist political thinking as we endeavored to make change in the communities from which we came. We were feminists, womanists, radical women of color finding our voices in the liminal spaces of the internet and it was beautiful. 2

As a grad student at Emory University, I was able to link the organizing I was doing through digital platforms to digital tools I could use in my research, something that had previously never occurred to me. It was at THATCamp Southeast, one of the initial THATCamps that energized the field of digital humanities in the US, that I saw the possibility of bridging my digital activism with my scholarship. The Humanities and Technology Camp was my first encounter with an unconference, where we as participants created the sessions we wanted to attend. In these sessions I learned how to use Omeka, ViewShare (R.I.P.), Voyant and other digital tools from the people who created them. I transformed my dissertation with digital tools that made my project more compelling and easier to execute. THATCamp introduced me to the field of DH and I was instantly connected to the network of blogs, and later tweets, that were the central nodes of DH community. 3

It didn't take long to realize that the same issues that me and my social justice minded social media friends lamented, were alive and well in DH. The field was a boys' club, a white boys' club at that, and there was such an emphasis on doing and building, that critique and reflection were considered ancillary. An early blog post I wrote, “All the Digital Humanists Are White, All the Nerds Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave,” addressed this all too familiar phenomenon of the DH big tent's inability to recognize its own practitioners if they didn't fit a conventional mold [Bailey 2011]. The piece was shepherded through the publication process by Natalie Cecire who used her relative postdoc privilege to add an 4

addendum to the first issue of the *Journal of Digital Humanities* that brought critical theory into the DH mix. The zero degrees of separation of a small but digitally invested field, connected through well-funded unconferences and conferences alike, fueled my ability to get published, get a postdoc position myself, and ultimately helped me land a tenure track job.

And yet, I can't help but feel the sails of DH starting to deflate. THATCamps are almost entirely gone as the initially generous philanthropic Mellon Foundation funding ran out. DH blogs and Twitter posts have reached a saturation point that thwarts the communal watercooler conversations they used to encourage. The big tent of DH has gotten bigger in terms of faculty and librarians who see themselves as practitioners in the field but the number of graduate students looking to DH for career advancement seems to be plateauing if not dwindling in the US. DH and alt-ac careers are slowly losing their shiny veneer as the market itself offers fewer options for all PhD graduates.

The early concerns of hack vs. yack – can you code or are you just talking about code – remain entrenched and I worry that students are still subtly taught that their DH doesn't "count" if it's not heavier on the digital than it is on the humanities. I see students trying to teach themselves coding languages on top of completing their regular coursework. Initiatives to bring HBCUs and liberal arts colleges into the DH universe seem to be about making these smaller communities mirror the larger better funded universities when these schools don't have the same capacity. Simple tools that make our research easier to do and more accessible to students and communities remain on the margins of the field's center of gravity. The way that digital pedagogy and its practitioners are subtly disparaged and considered less authentically DH comes to mind.

At the same time, I am heartened by the persistent if not growing number of BIPOC in the field of DH and its companion disciplines of communication studies and computer science. The creators of this volume and their white allies are doing the work to ensure that DH remains attentive to issues of race, ability, sexuality, and class as the ground of the field continues to shift. Texts like this one provide such an important possibility model for DH collaborative work and I hope we are in store for more.

Works Cited

Bailey 2011 Bailey, M. (2011). "All the Digital Humanists Are White, All the Nerds Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave". *Journal of Digital Humanities*. 1.1. <http://journalofdigitalhumanities.org/1-1/all-the-digital-humanists-are-white-all-the-nerds-are-men-but-some-of-us-are-brave-by-moya-z-bailey/>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.