Our Time Is Now (It's Always Been Our Time)

Roopika Risam <roopika_dot_risam_at_dartmouth_dot_edu>, Dartmouth College https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0742-7352

Abstract

In this reflection, I discuss my path into digital humanities scholarship through Black studies. I share how I became involved in digital humanities in the 2000s as a graduate student who found that it offered answers to methodological problems I was encountering in my research. Then, I examine how early career colleagues and I banded together to create a space for Black studies and other ethnic studies fields within digital humanities in the early 2010s. Finally, I propose that addressing race — and its relationship to gender, sexuality, nation, disability, and colonialism, among others — is a matter of scholarly integrity that must be put at the center of digital humanities inquiry today.

I came to digital humanities through Black Studies, looking for answers to a question — and found more questions. But the answer was always clear: we are the ones we've been waiting for to create the space for digital humanities to more fully realize the promise of the democratization of knowledge and to improve representation of minoritized communities in the digital cultural record.

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In the late 2000s, beginning my dissertation on what W.E.B. Du Bois called the "global color line," I struggled with the limits of written text as I tried to articulate flows of knowledge between social movements influenced by Black radicalism. Paper seemed ill-equipped to contain what was coming to life as a vibrant, multidirectional exchange around the world. Every attempt to pin it down seemed a pale (pun intended) representation of beautiful complexity that lived in institutional and community archives.

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One day, everything changed. Doing research in the Huey Newton Papers at Stanford University, I came across subscriber rolls of *The Black Panther* newspaper, a globally circulated periodical from the Black Panther Party. While many countries represented on the rolls were unremarkable given the history of Black internationalism (Cuba, the USSR, Algeria), others were surprising (Norway, Denmark, Poland). Perhaps, if I could put this data on a map, I'd have a heuristic to think through ideas I struggled to commit to paper. A digital humanist was born.

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I didn't know this was called "digital humanities," and I'm not sure many who were working in the burgeoning field knew that either.[1] While digital humanities has well-documented, if contested, roots in areas like humanities computing and computer and writing, I found digital humanities — and digital humanities found me — in its early years, not long after the term "digital humanities" had been introduced through publication of *The Blackwell Companion to Digital Humanities* in 2004.[2]

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Becoming part of a conversation in its nascent moments, where the terms of the engagement were being hashed out in the early 2010s — and, unusually for academic discourse, hashed out through Twitter hashtags — was empowering and discouraging in equal measure, particularly when one comes to it as I did: as an answer to methodological problems I encountered in Black Studies. I had not come to digital humanities through the same routes of other digital humanists of my generation, many of whom were graduate students at universities with senior digital humanities scholars, but by accident.[3] Not having a pedigree linking me to the emerging community of digital humanists was simultaneously liberating and precarious. I was conscious — and anxious — that I didn't have anyone in the senior

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ranks to vouch for me,[4] but I also had the freedom to raise concerns, at times pugnaciously, about where discussions of race fit into digital humanities. During those early conversations on Twitter in the early 2010s, which accelerated the formation of digital humanities, I quickly realized that while two senior scholars — Amy Earhart and Tara McPherson[5] — were asking trenchant questions about race, it really wasn't a topic that many white digital humanists wanted to touch. And, to be blunt, entering that conversation — particularly as a woman of color — was terrifying.

Mercifully, I was not alone. While Twitter was a point of entry into the fray of digital humanities, it was also where I began to find my people — other graduate students of color, as well as senior allies and those in adjacent fields like new media studies, who'd found their way to digital humanities and shared my concerns about the ways that digital humanities elided questions of race and colonialism.[6] We set about finding new friends and building new worlds within digital humanities, hoping that the next generation of graduate students working in Black Studies and other ethnic studies fields could find a place without having to fight to make a place. Starting in the early 2010s, though this work remains ongoing, we created projects, organizations, journals, and scholarship to clear space for digital humanities in many areas of study — Black Studies, Caribbean studies, Latinx studies, Native and Indigenous studies, postcolonial studies.[7]

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But there were battles every step of the way.[8] While it's no longer controversial to address race in digital humanities in the early 2020s, these were tough conversations in the late 2000s and early 2010s. As was explained to me in my early days in digital humanities, the most visible, senior scholars in digital humanities had been toiling in obscurity, their voices unheard, their scholarship misunderstood for so long. And their work was finally being recognized — digital humanities had stepped onto the red carpet in our professional organizations, and it was *their* time. It was not *our* time.

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I have never been swayed by arguments about whose "time" it is because power — in this case, the power of academic discourse — operates precisely by dividing and conquering competing claims. It forces a fictive sense of prioritization, the sense that only one pressing need or concern can be at the forefront of conversation. Instead, the question we should be examining is how addressing the operations of race — and its relationship to gender, sexuality, nation, disability, and colonialism, among others — is nothing less than a matter of scholarly integrity and must be put at the center of digital humanities inquiry.

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We aren't there yet — but could be. And now *is* the time. It's always been our time.

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Notes

[1] I am still not sure whether digital humanities is a "field," "sub-field," or "methodological toolkit." Given the significant amount of ink spent on this debate, I'm not sure anyone else is either. Today, digital cultural mapping is such an accepted digital humanities practice, that it may seem odd that its status was ever in question.

[2] In "What Is Digital Humanities and What's It Doing in English Departments?" [Kirschenbaum 2010], Matthew Kirschenbaum recounts the emergence of the term "digital humanities," linking it to conversations between volume editors and the marketing department at Blackwell.

[3] In retrospect, my graduate fellowship at the Center for New Design in Learning and Technology (CNDLS) at Georgetown University in the mid-2000s was focused on digital humanities pedagogy, but we didn't call it that. I would later argue in *New Digital Worlds: Postcolonial Digital Humanities in Theory, Praxis, and Pedagogy* (Northwestern UP: 2018) that the work of my dissertation advisor Deepika Bahri at Emory University on "Postcolonial Studies @ Emory" in the 1990s was one of the first postcolonial digital humanities projects, though she didn't call it that either.

[4] I would be remiss to not note that the person who *did* vouch for me was one of my *peers*: Alex Gil, who was well known to this world and willing to put his burgeoning reputation on the line to raise up my voice. In doing so, he provided my first introduction to the ways we can build lateral relationships that challenge established hierarchies of power in the academy, which is now central to my work.

[5] At the time, in new media studies and related fields, there were many other brilliant voices, particularly women of color like Radhika Gajjala, Lisa Nakamura, and Anna Everett, whose work gave us foundations to build on for digital humanities.

[6] The lengthy acknowledgments in *New Digital Worlds* speak to the rich community of people who were part of this work in the late 2000s and

the 2010s and are available at https://muse.jhu.edu/chapter/2230419.

[7] Imagine a world before we had the AADHum (African American History, Culture and Digital Humanities Initiative at the University of Maryland – College Park), the Black Press Research Collective, *archipelagos*, The Caribbean Digital, the Center for Black Digital Research at Penn State, *Reviews in Digital Humanities*, Global Outlook::Digital Humanities, Digital Native American and Indigenous Studies, USLDH, the Digital Ethnic Futures Consortium, DISCO, and the many other projects and initiatives we have built. We lived it.

[8] There are stories. Just don't ask about what happened in Poland.

Works Cited

Kirschenbaum 2010 Kirschenbaum, Matthew G. (2010). "What is digital humanities and what's it doing in English departments." *ADE Bulletin* 150, 55-61.