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.

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.

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.

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]

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
The lengthy acknowledgments in Lisa Nakamura, and Anna Everett, whose work gave us foundations to build on for At the time, in new media studies and related fields, there were lateral relationships that challenge established 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.

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.

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


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