

Introduction to Community, Activism, and Innovation in Latin American and Latinx Public Digital Humanities [ht] [fr] [es] [pt]

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Initial translation into Portuguese: machine translation by Google Translate

DOI: pending

Abstract

This special issue proposes that the use of digital tools to achieve objectives that are not fundamentally digital is a central and defining activity in the context of Latin American and Latinx digital humanities. In many cases, those outcomes relate to highlighting and correcting injustice, promoting solidarity, and altering the ways we teach about Latin America and Latinx populations in the U.S. We do not argue that all digital work related to Latin America and Latinx communities should be understood as “public digital humanities” or “digital public humanities.” Instead, we suggest that the commitment to advocacy and social justice that informs scholarship in these areas frequently leads to the use of digital tools to achieve goals that focus not on technology but on building connections beyond academic spaces and engaging with real problems faced by actual people.

At the 2024 Latin American and Caribbean Digital Humanities Symposium at the Universidad de San Francisco in Quito, Ecuador, Juan Pablo Viteri delivered a keynote talk on the multimedia project *Radio COCOA* [Viteri 2024]. During his presentation, he made a statement that ran counter to what a DH audience might expect: “lo que menos me interesa de las humanidades digitales es la parte digital” (“what interests me least about the digital humanities is the digital part”). Rather than taking a stance against technology, however, Viteri was pointing to the fact that scholarly work built around the use of digital methods and tools allows us to do things that are not inherently digital: innovate, collaborate, and build communities. As the example of *Radio COCOA* makes clear, utilizing technology allowed Viteri and his team to rethink the scholarship they create, their methods for achieving those products, and the audiences they seek to reach.

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This special issue proposes that the use of digital tools to achieve objectives that are not fundamentally digital is a central and defining activity in the context of Latin American and Latinx digital humanities. In many cases, those outcomes relate to highlighting and correcting injustice, promoting solidarity, and altering the ways we teach about Latin America and Latinx populations in the U.S. We do not argue that all digital work related to Latin America and Latinx communities should be understood as “public digital humanities” or “digital public humanities.” Instead, we suggest that the commitment to advocacy and social justice that informs scholarship in these areas frequently leads to the use of digital tools to achieve goals that focus not on technology but on building connections beyond academic spaces and engaging with real problems faced by actual people.

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The projects examined in this special issue represent a small selection of the work taking place within Latin American and Latinx digital humanities that reflects such a vision. The program of the 2025 Latin American and Caribbean Digital Humanities Symposium, a six-day event held in Puerto Rico and online, demonstrates this point. Responding to the conference theme of “Digital Humanities, Memory and Community,” nearly 200 researchers, archivists, community members, students, and others came together to discuss numerous projects that are concerned with using digital methods to carry out collective action, preserve community memory, and build solidarity with communities [2025 Latin American & Caribbean Digital Humanities Symposium 2025].

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Academic and Political Contexts

For over a decade, experts have been warning of the dire state of the humanities in the U.S. academy [Bérubé 2013]; [Schuessler 2013];[Townsend 2024]. An emphasis on STEM fields beginning in the early 2010s led many to question the value of the humanities, an attitude reinforced by political leaders who have openly denounced humanities fields as impractical and politically suspect. The increasing cost of higher education and uncertain economic conditions have led students wary of debt and fearing limited future opportunities to choose majors that lead to specific professional fields. In some states, performance funding metrics encourage institutional policies at public universities that disadvantage humanities fields, and recent attacks on diversity, equity and inclusion in higher education have placed restrictions on humanities curriculum and faculty speech. Declining enrollments in humanities majors provide a justification for defunding and eliminating critical programs in languages, literatures, and the arts, in particular.

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The recent decline in the humanities in the U.S. academy is part of a long trend. As Eric Adler notes, the present circumstances reflect the continuation of a pattern of privileging practical education that dates from the late nineteenth century: “As proponents of the humanities have noted for over a century, the humanistic disciplines were likely to wither in a system deliberately created to marginalize them” [Adler 2025]. We may have reached a critical point in that process today, however, with some suggesting that the humanities may disappear from higher education altogether. On a recent episode of the *New York Times* podcast *Hard Fork*, for instance, historian D. Graham Burnett proposed that such an outcome is possible because “the shifting economics of education” have led administrators, parents and students to all focus on the “return on [...] tuition investment” and “an increasingly exigent job market.” Burnett suggests that the humanities must find other contexts in which to survive: “the most important forms of that work are going to need to happen outside of colleges and universities” [Roose and Newton 2025].

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As rapid social and technological transformation have created new challenges in recent years, the humanities have often not helped themselves by seeming resistant to change. Many scholars engage with today’s world but often do so using traditional methods and creating familiar types of products, usually books and scholarly articles, often working in isolation. To some extent, this is inevitable, as institutional structures and disciplinary expectations reward the production of traditional scholarly outputs while disincentivizing experimentation. The situation is exacerbated by the scarcity of tenure-track positions and the resulting exclusion of talented young scholars who could provide vision needed to transform our fields.

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Teaching in the humanities, in particular, can often feel out of step with realities beyond the academy. We frequently adhere to traditional methods that ignore students’ concerns over economic insecurity, do not effectively respond to a societal climate of anti-intellectualism, and fail to put pressure on entrenched institutional approaches. Our classrooms remain essential spaces for learning to think critically, communicate effectively, work collaboratively, and appreciate differences, but our students often lack access to the applied learning that might help them connect with communities, imagine their future professional selves and prepare for their lives after graduation.

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As enrollments in humanities programs continue to decline, the advent of widely available artificial intelligence tools such as ChatGPT have added another layer of complexity to what already feels like a grim situation. Big Tech’s pursuit of developing human-like intelligence feels dystopian and is, as authors Timnit Gebru and Émile P. Torres [Gebru and Torres 2024] signal, a scientific enterprise embedded in eugenicist ideologies. As such, some researchers assert that the humanities, as fields that deal with the complexities of being human, are more relevant than ever.

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Laurent Dubreuil, for instance, argues in the recent book *Humanities in the Time of AI* that artificial intelligence “offers a

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chance for the humanities to strengthen their relevance and their signification” [Dubreuil 2025, 1]. Lauren Klein et al. make a similar point, observing that research related to AI has “opened up new possibilities for conversation and collaboration between computing, engineering, and the humanities” [Klein et al. 2025, 14]. Dubreuil and Klein et. al. advocate not only for more equitable interdisciplinary partnerships in our research and teaching, but for academic spaces in which humanities scholarship is viewed as central to addressing the many challenges facing human societies today.

Those whose professional activity revolves around the teaching of language and cultures, in particular, may reasonably question such optimism, however. The Modern Language Association reported a 29.3% drop in language enrollments between 2009 and 2021 ([Lusin et al. 2023, 4]), prior to the release of ChatGPT in November 2022 and the recent surge in AI-related technologies that power simultaneous translation. In an *Atlantic* article titled “The End of Foreign-Language Education,” journalist Louise Matsakis reflected on watching a video of herself “talking in perfect Chinese” that she had generated using AI [Matsakis 2024]. Apple instructs users to “[b]ridge language barriers in person — while traveling or navigating in a foreign country — with AirPods” [Apple 2025]. A growing perception that language study is increasingly unnecessary in this context, combined with the emphasis on cost cutting and efficiency that is driving decisions at institutions, offers a grim outlook for language programs across the U.S. [Johnston 2025]. Following the cancellation of all language programs at West Virginia University in 2023, news of the consolidation and closure of language programs, including at leading research institutions, has become common.

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We also find ourselves in a time when the embrace of other cultures at the heart of much humanities scholarship is under attack. In recent years, resentments and fears that were once latent have transformed into unabashed and often violent vilification and dehumanization of those who are different and often the most vulnerable among us. Anti-immigrant sentiment and overt racism in the US have surged to levels not seen in decades, a reality that has grown more intense since January of 2025, as the second Trump administration has made anti-immigration action and legislation top priorities.

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Latin Americans and Latinx populations in the US are among the groups particularly impacted by this open hostility. Masked ICE agents have abducted Latinx people from their homes and communities and incarcerated them without due process in improvised detention centers in the US, such as Florida’s “Alligator Alcatraz,” and in facilities abroad, including CECOT (Centro de Confinamiento del Terrorismo/Terrorism Confinement Center), a mega-prison in El Salvador [Fadel, Bearne, Gordemer, and Mai 2025];[Morel and Gordon 2025];[Graham 2025]. ^[1] The Trump administration has withdrawn Temporary Protected Status for Haitians and Venezuelans living in the U.S. [Department of Homeland Security 2025a], [Department of Homeland Security 2025b]. Many immigrants have expressed reluctance to leave their homes out of fear of detention, concerns validated by the Supreme Court’s recent approval of enforcement measures that rely on racial profiling [Carcamo, Solis, and Corchado 2025];[Jiménez et al. 2025];[Ryan et al. 2025].

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Students of Latin American origin face challenges not only in broader society but also in the particular context of higher education. They belong to communities that have historically encountered barriers to entering the system and have struggled to complete degrees, given the financial burdens and family responsibilities that they often must balance with their schoolwork [Genthe and Harrington 2022];[Gonzalez 2024];[Weissman 2024]. The dismantling of affirmative action, the defunding of campus initiatives and programs aimed at promoting diversity and inclusion, and the federal government’s recent discontinuation of grants to Hispanic-Serving Institutions ([U.S. Department of Education 2025]) make matters worse for these students, who often cannot see themselves reflected among faculty and their fellow students and fail to find a sense of belonging.

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At the same time, the struggles of marginalized groups in Latin America itself continue unabated. In many places, violence against women and LGBTQIA+ individuals has become a normalized backdrop to everyday life. Indigenous communities face discrimination, the destruction of their lands, and sustained efforts to erase them from society. Those of African descent throughout the region must still fight for visibility, justice, and equal participation in societies that have long minimized their contributions or denied their existence. Community leaders and activists who resist injustice are routinely punished and assassinated [da Silva Ribeiro Gomez 2024];[Nieto-Matiz 2025].

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In the face of all these realities, the need for new approaches to scholarship in the humanities is more urgent than ever. Scholars must project their activity into public spaces and engage with those outside the academy. They must demonstrate the value of their work. They likewise must provide students with opportunities to gain formative experiences beyond the classroom and help students of Latin American backgrounds find ways to create spaces of their own within higher education and beyond. Those whose work deals with marginalized peoples must build solidarity with those communities and co-create best practices for working together.

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The projects described in this special issue, in particular, draw on community knowledge as a first step in countering or resisting fascism and white supremacy, both within and outside of academic institutions. To return to the first lines of this introduction, it is not the digital tools or methods that make these projects powerful, but rather the human relationships that are constructed and sustained across disciplines and among community stakeholders whose voices have historically been marginalized, sometimes even in the telling of their own histories. Here, we can consider Haiti, a Black nation in Latin America that, in addition to bearing the immediate burden of climate catastrophe caused by corporate actions in the Global North, continues to face racist typification and violence in North American and global media. The history of Haiti, as performer-scholar-activist [Ulysse 2015] reminds us, is deserving of “new narratives” — ones that are for and by Haitians. The articles in this special issue illuminate the significance of human relationships and community accountability within broader projects of countering hegemonic, racist, and fascist logics that continue to prescribe who gets to be human in the digital age.

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Approaches to Latin American and Latinx DH in the U.S., and Wider Implications

This special issue features articles about a collection of digital projects focused on Latin America and Latinx populations that speak to the notion of a more engaged, socially committed humanities. All are dedicated to connecting with communities, effecting change in the real world, and exploring collaborative modes of knowledge creation. They are all built on sophisticated theoretical foundations but carry out their work in accessible spaces in which non-academic publics are invested. Focusing on the meaningful human interaction at the center of the humanities, each of the projects suggests ways that our research and teaching can create shared experiences in which real people cannot be supplanted by technology. They demonstrate ways we can learn ways to intervene in society’s use of technology and shape it through humanistic inquiry.

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Each project possesses a value that extends beyond its own particular worth, representing a model for a type of scholarship that others can emulate or adapt. Involving approaches that include digital oral history, the use of social media as tools for scholarly communication and community building, and the recovery and transmission of cultural heritage materials, they demonstrate ways that specific methodologies can be deployed to carry out scholarship that is participatory and dynamic. These projects point to innovative methods for incorporating digital methods into undergraduate classrooms, and exemplify approaches to reimagining the role of the scholar and teacher beyond the campus in the public sphere.

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The authors of each article analyze critically how their work intersects with the notions of community, activism, and innovation. In doing so, they discuss their experiences conducting public-facing scholarship, explain the collaborative models they have developed, and consider the role of this work in their teaching and service. They examine the ethical aspects of their projects and their responsibilities as scholars, and in some cases as members of specific communities, working beyond traditional academic spaces. They analyze matters of positionality, considering how they locate themselves in relation to the communities they study or with whom they collaborate.

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While this special issue focuses specifically on DH practice within the study of Latin America and Latinx communities in the U.S., the collection intersects with broader concerns within the digital humanities globally. The articles all address the mission, as expressed by *DHQ* itself, to “achieve social change and social justice, and to make the field of digital humanities visible as a space for racial and gender equity” [About *DHQ* n.d.]. They do so by providing a forum for scholars of color to discuss, on their own terms, the challenges of conducting scholarly work of importance to their communities. Most of the contributors to this special issue identify as non-white and work in academic and cultural traditions that are underrepresented in DH scholarship and institutional spaces.

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Similarly, as the majority of the contributors to this special issue are women, we believe this project highlights the leadership that women scholars are playing in the development of transformational work within public DH. Not only do their efforts often center the experience of gender and intersectionality, but they also demonstrate the potential of digital methods for illuminating and countering the logics of patriarchy and white supremacy as they operate within higher education and research spaces. Their work focuses on building communities and redefining scholarly objectives in the contexts of teaching, research and service, and their diverse scholarly approaches suggest ways to challenge patriarchal and racist paradigms by emphasizing methodologies that emphasize empathy, self-awareness, respect for difference, non-hierarchical structures, ethical practices and attention to intersectionality. 21

This special issue embraces another kind of diversity by centering the voices of junior scholars. Three of the four guest editors and most of the authors are early-career scholars. In this way, the collection showcases the commitment of the DH community to creating space for the ideas of the young scholars who, despite the difficult professional circumstances they often face in today's academy, are working creatively and tirelessly to define the future of the field. 22

We believe this special issue contributes to promoting the international, multilingual character of the digital humanities. The collection points to a DH geography that expands beyond the boundaries of the Anglophone world and Western Europe, reaching into cultural spaces across Latin America and the Caribbean and exploring the often invisible transnational, transborder, and diasporic geographies within the United States of communities that have their roots in those regions. The editors and authors likewise seek to engage with questions about what it means to do DH in languages other than English, and, following the initial release of this special issue, will subsequently publish each article in at least one other language: Spanish, French, or Haitian Creole. An addendum to this introduction will be published once all the translations are added. 23

This special issue also asks questions about how we define DH, responding to *DHQ*'s standing call for contributions that "probe the boundaries of the domain or re-examine its foundational premises." The articles in this special collection demonstrate a type of DH that does not privilege the digital nor the traditional humanities, but rather uses digital tools and humanities frameworks to engage with real communities and the challenges they face. DH itself has been considered a kind of "applied humanities," but these projects go a step further, working in service of goals that make a real and immediate difference to people who have been neglected not only by society but also the academy. In doing so, this special issue seeks to speak to an active, committed DH that is both political and profoundly personal. 24

In addressing these topics, this collection fits into a series represented by several recent special issues of *DHQ*. Through its focus on diversity and inclusion, this issue connects with *Black Digital Humanities in the Rising Generation* ([Black Digital Humanities in the Rising Generation 2022]), *Minimal Computing* ([Minimal Computing 2022]), *Digital Sankofa: Understanding the Past and Futures of Black Digital Humanities* ([Digital Sankofa: Understanding the Past and Futures of Black Digital Humanities 2024]), and most recently, *The Politics and Ethics of Naming the Names of Enslaved People in Digital Humanities Projects* ([The Politics and Ethics of Naming the Names of Enslaved People in Digital Humanities Projects 2025]). By highlighting non-Anglophone traditions, this issue also relates to the special issues on DH in Spanish (12.1, 2018) and Portuguese (14.2, 2020), and the collection *Digital Humanities & Colonial Latin American Studies* ([Digital Humanities & Colonial Latin American Studies 2020]). Through their attention to the pedagogical implications of their work, the authors also address topics that relate to *Imagining the DH Undergraduate: Special Issue in Undergraduate Education in DH* ([Imagining the DH Undergraduate: Special Issue in Undergraduate Education in DH 2017]). 25

Summary of Contributions

Sylvia Fernández Quintanilla, Carolina E. Alonso, Maira E. Álvarez, and Laura Gonzales discuss *United Fronteras*, a collective of activists and scholars who critically examine the Mexico-US border as a fluid space endowed with multiple layers of meaning represented publicly and digitally through different forms and mediums. The group, consisting mostly women of color who have experienced the border region in different ways, co-created a registry of digital materials and projects that address questions of concern to the communities on both sides of that largely arbitrary and imaginary frontier, from before colonial times to the present. In their article, they consider the project's use of minimal computing 26

and its engagement with matters of cultural history, and political and gender violence, in order to reveal the complexities of a human space so often portrayed in simplistic and negative terms.

Siobhan Meĩ and Jonathan Michael Square reflect on their experience cofounding and leading *Rendering Revolution: Sartorial Approaches to Haitian History*. The project defines itself as “a queer, bilingual, feminist experiment in digital interdisciplinary scholarship that uses the lens of fashion and material culture to trace the aesthetic, social, and political reverberations of the Haitian Revolution as a world-historical moment.” Meĩ and Square examine the collaborative efforts of a team whose expertise lies in translation, visual culture, and cultural theory, and the project’s use of Instagram as a platform for analyzing Haitian history and culture. Presented as a conversation between the two authors, their contribution demonstrates how *Rendering Revolution* connects the past and present in ways that are visually compelling and argues for the power of social media as a tool for scholarly communication.

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Constanza López Baquero analyzes *Voces y Caras: Latinx Communities of North Florida*, an oral history project in which Latinx students design and carry out interviews with local Hispanic residents at the University of North Florida. Over the past thirteen years, hundreds of students and community members have participated, building a vast archive of stories focused on the realities of immigration, the experiences of women in Hispanic cultures, and the diversity found among those of Latin American origin in the US. In her article, López Baquero tells the story of the project, highlights a selection of interviews, and explains how, the project — through both its digital and non-digital components — showcases the perspectives of communities who are otherwise largely invisible in the region.

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Nicole Willson considers *Fanm Rebèl: Excavating the Histories of Haiti’s Women Revolutionaries*, a three-year research project sponsored by the Leverhulme Trust and the Institute for Black Atlantic Research at the University of Central Lancashire. *Fanm Rebèl* seeks to excavate stories of women in the Haitian Revolution, highlighting radical acts of female insurgency and marronage and exploring narratives of resistance articulated through spiritual practice, domestic labor, creativity, survival, subterfuge and armed combat. In her article, Willson considers the project as a hub for collaboration between scholars, collectors, conservators, archivists and other interested parties in the community.

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Lauren Royes-Baccus reflects on *Salt & Aloes* as a digital platform for radical systems of knowledge sharing through which Caribbean material and visual culture can be reimagined, reoriented, and resourced. The project seeks to unmoor the region from an aesthetic and projected conceptualization rooted in the abstracted and passive other. Royes-Baccus considers how the work of *Salt & Aloes* centers the Caribbean’s active use and transformation of objects, the generative praxis of creatives from/in/of the region, and the material restitution of its past, present and future.

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Sylvia Mendoza Aviña considers *MAS Muxeres: Oral Histories of Chicana/x leaders in Mexican American Studies Programs* in San Antonio, Texas, as an oral history and digital humanities project that documents the contributions of the women laboring to keep the field alive and thriving. Despite their daily efforts to support MAS/Chicanx studies in their roles as program coordinators, instructors/professors, community organizers, and scholar activists, much of the institutional memory, organizing, and strategizing of these *muxeres* remains unrecorded. Mendoza Aviña argues that their knowledge is useful and necessary for current and future generations invested in not only sustaining, but building MAS/Chicanx studies, especially within places like Texas that are attempting to further whitewash school curriculum and texts through bills that attack critical race theory, diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI), and academic freedom.

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Robert Irwin explores *Humanizing Deportation*, a participatory audiovisual project that since early 2017 has documented and disseminated the repercussions of contemporary migration and border control laws and policies on vulnerable migrants in the United States and Mexico. Through on-the-ground collaborations with deported migrants and asylum seekers in Tijuana and elsewhere, the project has published over 450 digital stories on its bilingual website. Irwin considers how *Humanizing Deportation* has increasingly developed strategies for incorporating undergraduate students into its research team, allowing these students, many of whose families are affected by such laws and policies, to become directly and meaningfully involved in helping migrants communicate their experiences and concerns to the world.

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Eduard Arriaga-Arango studies *Baobaixa*, an initiative developed by the Afro-Brazilian network Rede Mocambos that serves as a model of community digital organizing as a way to propose data justice, digital sovereignty and autonomy.

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Baobaixa is a technology that interconnects diverse communities in Brazil (i.e., Quilombos, Indigenous communities and Favelas, among others), and also creates a structure to store, curate and disseminate local knowledge, traditions, histories and representations. In his article, Arriaga-Arango proposes *Baobaixa* as a model for how non-expert communities can use digital strategies to defend their territory, preserve their cultural production, and affirm their human condition.

Conclusion

This special issue showcases a collection of efforts, reflected in digital projects (in-process or finalized) in which technology is critical not on its own terms, but rather for the ways it allows scholars to engage in activities that are essentially non-digital in nature. By arguing that the use of technology can be instrumental — but is not the point — we believe the articles gathered here contribute to highlighting a paradox in the way DH has long been perceived by those outside the field. The “STEM for the humanities” paradigm has attracted administrators and provoked the suspicion of traditional humanities scholars, emphasizing the incorporation of digital tools into humanities scholarship as being, in some way, about technology. The articles gathered here demonstrate ways that much work in the digital humanities today is not fundamentally about technology, but rather about topics that, in some political and institutional contexts, may make decision makers uncomfortable and which our colleagues outside of DH might recognize as representing continuity with the work of the traditional humanities.

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Much of DH remains highly computational in nature and much work arguably emerges from questions that are informed more by computer science than the traditional humanities. The expansion of the field in recent years, however, has brought a greater recognition that DH often involves using digital tools to counter injustice and construct communities, effecting work that points to new ways that the humanities can engage with the public and demonstrate their relevance in a world where the human experience is increasingly devalued. Like many of the projects highlighted here, such efforts often involve students and frequently imply a reconsideration of our collaborations as well as a reevaluation of what we teach, how, and why.

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By bringing together the concepts of community and activism — both central to Latin American and Latinx scholarship — with an emphasis on the notions of intervention, innovation, and invention that characterize DH, this multilingual collection points to ways that the larger community of humanists and digital humanists can learn from the work being done by and with diverse populations that have survived historical injustices and continue to suffer and resist marginalization today, both within the US and throughout Latin America and the Caribbean. Highlighting, in particular, the work of interdisciplinary scholars of color, women scholars, and early-career scholars, this special issue offers models for designing hands-on, engaged humanities praxis that can better connect with and serve multilingual and multicultural students and diverse communities beyond the academy and across geographies.

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