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Introduction: Reconsidering the Present and Future of the Digital Humanities

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I do not think it unreasonable to suggest that “digital humanities” (DH) is something of a charged term. Many of its opponents wish it would just go away and stop neoliberalizing and cannibalizing the humanities, while even some of its advocates have grown weary of the “what is/are DH?” debate, on reifying its value to the humanities, and figuring out where their “new” sorts of practices fit in long-established disciplinary and institutional structures. We might see a day when arguments about DH, its parameters and intellectual and pedagogical purposes are no longer in vogue, but we are not there yet. In fact, I would hold that the “we no longer need to talk about what the digital humanities are” perspective is quite premature. It has been over a decade now since Stephen Ramsay got himself into all sorts of trouble for asking—at a 2011 MLA panel on the future of DH—“who’s in and who’s out?” (2013, 240). But is that question really so untimely?

Nobody wants to talk about who’s in and who’s out, because to do so will inevitably involve exclusion, and if there is anything that research culture and education could do without, its more exclusion. Consequently, the conversation that Ramsay attempted to start never really progressed, the consensus now being that one does not waste their time navel-gazing about what the digital humanities look like, or even better, what they should look like, but rather, get on with the actual work of doing research in the humanities that relies heavily on some new-fangled digital tool or technique. Eventually, we will all just come to know good DH work when we see it, and the field will naturally become a “semi-normal thing” (Underwood 2019). Everyone will start to see that DH is not at all about “building project websites” because sophisticated applications of cultural analytics will become more commonplace, and the “charlatans” (Unsworth 2002) who think they are doing DH because they are blogging or tweeting, will simply fade into obscurity.

It seems reasonable to expect the “real” digital humanities to just become known in time, but the last two decades or so—what might be thought of as the “DH moment” (Gold 2012)—have seen a lot of resources, both fiscal and human, committed to this thing called DH. It is not, to further quote Ramsay, “some airy Lyceum,” but rather, it is “money, students, funding agencies, big schools, little schools, programs, curricula, old guards, new guards, gatekeepers, and prestige” (2013, 240). And yet, despite all this investment, all these “concrete instantiations,” there are still

people who think DH is putting pictures of books on WordPress sites. Perhaps it is time we stopped asking what DH is, and returned to the contentious task of saying what it is not.

We have given so much to the digital humanities that it seems almost reckless to argue that we should halt all typological discussions of the field, that policymakers, institutions, and educators should simply continue to invest in DH for the sake of keeping up with the Joneses. Whatever DH has been—and there are some compelling treatments of its histories (Jones 2013; Terras, Nyhan, and Vanhoutte 2013; Nyhan and Flinn 2016; Kim and Koh 2021)—it is imperative that the discipline’s present moments are continuously reassessed, not so that we can carry on with the navel-gazing, but rather, so that we might learn from the mistakes of present DH in an attempt to better shape our DH futures.

Re-engaging with the question, “What are the digital humanities?,” has never been timelier. DH is everywhere, across all continents and cultures, all intellectual communities and research practices. In any institution that does research or teaching in the arts and humanities, if a concerted effort to develop some form of work in the digital humanities is already underway, the “what is/are DH?” conversation has probably been had. This is a natural consequence of the (perhaps unfortunate) fact that most human experiences are now mediated through software and screens—it was inevitable that the digital would eventually start to radically change the arts and humanities. This change is not always positive, but it is happening, and closing our eyes to it and hoping that it works out for the best—that our disciplinary practices, methodologies, knowledge, and learners will just settle into some new shape that suits everyone—is, to reiterate, quite reckless. Whether one loves or loathes the digital humanities (whatever one thinks that term to mean), it is intellectually dishonest for any researcher, administrator, cultural practitioner, or teacher to simply turn their gaze from the substantive social and cultural shifts that we are seeing in this age of machines. If we are going to invest public funds in DH, if we are going to research and teach it; if we are going to re-design cultural spaces so that they better incorporate digital ways of representation, and if we are going to at least attempt to reclaim some “cultural authority” (Drucker 2012) from those who build the tools and technologies on which we have become utterly reliant, then we need to at least talk about DH. And then we need to talk about DH again, and again.

This book attempts to reconsider the digital humanities. As a “handbook,” it acts as an essential guide to reconsidering the digital humanities, and that is what DH needs right now; not more tools and methods, but renewed engagement with a very basic question—“to what end?” Conscious of DH’s past and present, this is a future-focused handbook, one that attempts to envisage where the dominant sentiments and practices of the day might take us in the coming times, what should be protected, and what might be better jettisoned. This handbook is a reference to the present, but it also provides instructions on how we might get to some other future.

The text is divided into five thematic clusters: “Perspectives & Polemics,” “Methods, Tools & Techniques,” “Public Digital Humanities,” “Institutional Contexts,” and “DH Futures.” These clusters represent those areas thought most essential to the act of disciplinary reconsideration: epistemology, methodology, knowledge and representation, pedagogy, labor, future possibilities and their preconditions. Like any such volume it is incomplete and imperfect, but it nonetheless provides a set of comprehensive provocations on some of the most important topics in the digital humanities, and indeed, wider arts and humanities as a whole.

In her essay, “Digital Humanities Futures,” Amy Earhart cites Rosanne G. Potter, who, all the way back in 1989, called for “a new kind of literary study absolutely comfortable with scientific

methods yet completely suffused with the values of the humanities” (Earhart 2016). The DH moment has produced some remarkable scholarship and public resources, but Potter’s vision seems as distant now as it did in the late 1980s. Across all disciplines in the humanities, digital or otherwise, we find scholars who are uncomfortable with methods beyond those with which they are familiar, and the values of the humanities have never seemed more absent from those institutions from which they first emerged. Self-preservation and progression have become central to the academic psyche: overheads from funding are valued over the making of meaning, students are treated like customers, and scholars compete among themselves for professional capital, either to escape precarity, or to further their own individual careers.

The computer, an immensely powerful instrument that has radically reshaped culture and society, has not produced the type of interdisciplinarity Potter imagined. Instead, the computer has just become a thing that must be learned; rather than broadly facilitating new approaches to the great questions of culture, it has made such pursuits seem redundant in a world where critical thinking is seen as less relevant to the workplace than programming. Everyone is frustrated, but everyone must survive so nothing changes—no one wishes to reconsider DH, because DH secures enrollment, it makes students feel less panicked about the perils of studying philosophy and literature. It is a grim situation and it is one that nobody wants: those in the digital humanities simply want to do humanities research, but using new computer-assisted methods, and those beyond DH want to do what they have always done, and be left alone to get on with that (hugely important) work. Interdisciplinarity will happen where it needs to happen, and some of it will involve DH, some of it will not. But the aforementioned frustration has further fueled the antagonism between differing disciplinary and cultural perspectives, and instead of a humanities comfortable with scientific methods but still suffused with its own values, we have division and confusion. Dismissive op-eds and aggressive Twitter spats are commonplace in assessments of the digital humanities, and all the while it is becoming increasingly difficult for scholars of DH to separate themselves from the market mentality that compels administrators to shut down archaeology and classics departments while opening new humanities “laboratories” and creative “exploratoriums.”

Whatever one might say about the future of digital humanities, it seems reasonable to assert that we should strive for something different to its present. Earhart believes that such a future needs to be built on “shared spaces,” that scholars need to collaborate so as to “develop working models that best articulate our hopes” (2016). Articulating our hopes seems like such a simple starting point, but we even seem incapable of that. Ramsay argued that future digital humanists should all be coders—a position not too dissimilar from Potter’s—and his brief speech has been roundly pilloried ever since. It is a brave person who now dares to envision a future for the digital humanities, or even just praise or critique what we have at present. Anyone who disagrees will do so publicly and vehemently, because that is what intellectual exchange has become in our age—a reflection of everyone’s anxieties and fears, a part of that desperate attempt to survive in socio-economic contexts where most perish. If only everyone could get along, bring shared values (Spiro 2012) to the shared spaces, then everything would be a great deal better.

This book will attract several kinds of reader: dyed-in-the-wool DHers, the DH-curious, and naysayers. I suspect each will find something to satisfy whatever urge brought them here to begin with, and each will take umbrage with some part or another. A good handbook should provide ready-made reference materials, a set of intuitive treatments of a consistent topic. Regardless of how

readers of this book view the digital humanities, my hope is that the provocations contained within facilitate some further progress, however small, towards Potter's "new kind" of humanities—a humanities in which there is no tension between misplaced senses of old and new, but simply a desire to produce and sustain cultural knowledge using all the capacities of both the human and the machine.

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