All the Digital Humanists Are White, All the Nerds Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave

MOYA Z. BAILEY

Following a fascinating talk by Ed Finn on the changing role and source of literary criticism in a digital age, Natalia Cecire queried the implicit neutrality of a term like "nerd." Melissa Harris-Perry's reclamation aside, the racialized and gendered aspects of nerddom, and by extension the digital humanities, offer opportunities for a more explicit engagement with positionalities that lead "white men to feel embattled." How do those outside the categories white and male navigate this burgeoning disciplinary terrain?

The ways in which identities inform both theory and practice in digital humanities have been largely overlooked. Those already marginalized in society and the academy can also find themselves in the liminal spaces of this field. By centering the lives of women, people of color, and disabled folks, the types of possible conversations in digital humanities shift. The move "from margin to center" offers the opportunity to engage new sets of theoretical questions that expose implicit assumptions about what and who counts in digital humanities as well as exposes structural limitations that are the inevitable result of an unexamined identity politics of whiteness, masculinity, and ablebodiness.

What counts as a digital humanities project? As an undergrad, I interacted with people who were actively doing intersectional digital humanities work in all but name in other arenas of the academy. Dr. Carla Stokes wrote her dissertation on the online culture of Black girls. She discussed how Black girls were using digital platforms like chat rooms, web pages, and blogs to create identity. Through the creation of the non-profit Helping Our Teen Girls, Stokes offered an alternative online network (which she built) that was peer moderated to help address issues of cyber-bullying, and the targeting of youth online by adults. Stokes work is lauded in Girls Studies and Critical Media Studies. While certainly a digital humanities project, her work has not been legible as such.

In attempting to speak to and reach communities we felt accountable to outside academia, the Crunk Feminist Collective began blogging in 2010. A collective of about ten academics and activists use social media platforms to talk about the realities of our world in accessible feminist language. This hybridizing of cultural production and a theoretical praxis, falls outside the purview of mainstream digital humanities but has been utilized in classrooms across the country.

Scholars like Lisa Nakamura brilliantly bridge both cultural criticism and digital humanities. In her recent scholarship, Nakamura examines the exploitation of indigenous women's labor in the construction of digital devices. Far from saying people of color are not engaged in digital humanities, Nakamura's work begs for a recentering of the conversation on the parts of the field that are messy. There is a need to address the complexities of globalization, colonization, and the alienated labor of people of color in the production of technology that advances digital scholarship practices that they will not be able to access or directly benefit from.

How and where do the humanities enter into digital humanities, and how can they change the way we talk in the field? I've been reading a lot of digital humanities blogs and the use of ableist language show that the work of disability scholars, while tangentially acknowledged, may not have shifted practices. Words, like "lame," "stupid," and "retarded" are used to describe problematic elements in the field without any recognition of their own problems. In doing the work of creating and utilizing

digital tools for better digital humanities projects, shouldn't we also be engaging the humanities themselves? There has been much needed criticism leveled at the free programing interface Codecademy. Had the creators worked with scholars in educational studies might they have produced a more accessible learning tool? In re-imagining what counts as digital humanities, we can draw on the wisdom of scholars who have addressed related issues in their own fields of study. Of all the emergent interdisciplinary spaces, digital humanities is uniquely poised to apply academic research to itself and its products.

In blog posts, Miriam Posner and Bethany Nowviskie have both addressed the structures that impede women from connecting to digital humanities. The increase of women in higher level positions within universities have led to changes in the infrastructure, with child care and nursing nests cropping up on campuses across the country. Similarly, people of color have been engaging in critical university studies long before the 1990s when the field is said to have emerged. By demanding space as students and faculty, in addition to advocating for rights as the laborers that built and maintain these institutions, people of color have organized through concerted effort to bring about changes in institutional culture and structure.

As more diverse groups of people have entered the academy and the field of digital humanities, the contours have been redefined. We are sometimes the square pegs that expose the unacknowledged round holes. There is an elasticity to digital humanities that makes this a solvable problem, and people are already working through it. The activism of groups like #transformDH, the promise of THATCamp Theory, and the work of Critical Code Studies are challenging the hacking through more directed yacking. Sparked by the dearth of women in the field, a THATCamp Feminisms has been proposed. Initiatives like Black Girls Code are truly grassroots, reaching girls of color in elementary and middle school with opportunities to engage STEM before they are tracked away from it.[1]

There is still a need to challenge the "add and stir" model of diversity, a practice of sprinkling in more women, people of color, disabled folks and assuming that is enough to change current paradigms. This identity based mixing does little to address the structural parameters that are set up when a homogeneous group has been at the center and don't automatically engender understanding across forms of difference. It elides the scholarship already in production that may not be readily apparent when looking from a singular perspective. As opposed to meeting people where they are, where people of color, women, people with disabilities are already engaged in digital projects, there's a making of room at an already established table. Work that is already aligned with the digital humanities and perhaps even pushing the field in new directions should be celebrated and sought out, a process that will no doubt reveal, that some of us are brave.

* Title adapted from All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us are Brave.[2]

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[1] Karolyn Tyson, *Integration Interrupted: Tracking, Black Students, and Acting White after Brown* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). ↩

[2] Gloria T. Hull, Barbara Smith, and Patricia Bell Scott, eds. *But Some of Us are Brave* (Old Westbury, N.Y.: The Feminist Press, 1983). ↩

About Moya Z. Bailey

Moya Bailey is a graduate candidate at Emory University where she explores critical race, feminist, and disability studies. Her current work focuses on constructs of health and normativity within a US context. She is interested in how race, gender, and sexuality are represented in media and medicine. She is a blogger and digital alchemist for the Crunk Feminist Collective. In a co-authored piece for *Ms. Magazine*, Bailey proclaims "Black Feminism Lives (online)!" and chronicles the digital discourses of race, gender, and politics as articulated by young black women in cyber space.