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introduction:

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Last weekend I attended a conference at Yale University titled *The Past's Digital Presence: Database, Archive, and Knowledge Work in the Humanities*. I'm only just starting to explore how I'll relate my own scholarship to digital methods and products, so the conference was a help in getting acquainted with the issues within the field of digital humanities. It was also good to meet a number of grad students and scholars working in digital humanities. In this blog post, I want to reflect on a few of the talks that I found most engaging.

Peter Stallybrass's keynote lecture on Saturday morning was eye-opening. Stallybrass argued that conceptions of the codex as a device for linear reading are mistaken. The innovation of the codex as against the scroll was allowing for "random access" to the contents of a book. He backed up that point with numerous photographs of medieval manuscripts and artwork that illustrate technology for reading, such as hand-drawn fingers pointing to important passages (ancestors of manicules or printer's fists) and book weights, lazy susans, and artificial fingers. He drew the inference that by using the codex, Christians enabled typological readings of the Old Testament. His key methodological point was that photographs of manuscripts and rare books are, in some ways, more useful than the actual artifacts. Photographs permit access to texts at times and places distant from the library, and they permit researchers to look at texts more closely than one can do with even a magnifying glass.

Stallybrass's point about photographs was questioned (though not directly) in a panel on "The Material Object in Digital Culture." Two panels by Heather Ball and Jessica Weare asked what we lose by looking at digital copies of sources. Ball pointed out the richness of the actual sources, while Weare pointed out an instance of where Google Books (possibly, allegedly) may have removed a printer's notice from a book they scanned. I'm certainly sympathetic to the notion that we must account for the biases that digital research introduces to our research. As an example from my own research, I'm heavily indebted to Readex's digital *Archive of Americana*, but I would be a poor Americanist indeed if I never got beyond the digital edition of printed texts to examine manuscripts or other sources. But I think the point of this panel was overdrawn (and far too eagerly accepted by some of the audience members who were hostile to digital methods). The implied dichotomy was between digital copies and the artifacts themselves, but that dichotomy is false. Digital and analog work best together as a complementary, not competitive technologies. When there is a dichotomy, it is not between access to digital copies and access to actual

artifacts, but between access to digital copies and no access at all.

Shane Landrum (fellow PhD student in history at Brandeis University) continued the discussion about photographing sources in his very practical talk, "Camera, Laptop, and What Else?: Hacking Better Tools for the Short Archival Research Trip." Shane described how he photographs documents in almost an industrial process. Shane's process is impressive, but I'm ambivalent about implementing it for myself. As I understand it, Shane reads very few of the documents while he is photographing them, saving the actual research for after his trips. Perhaps I'm overly optimistic about the amount of time I'll have to actually read in the archives: I'm certainly fortunate to live within an hour of several of the main libraries for the topics I research. Then too, I work in a period that has many fewer documents than Shane's. But I like to think that reading the sources in the archive has served me well. I'm often surprised by the discrepancy between what I think will be important before I get to the archive, and what I find to be important after I get there. But, like Shane, I photograph everything I think I might cite or quote (at least at archives that permit me to), so I'm sure I'll benefit from the suggestions in his talk.

Simon Wiles gave a very impressive talk about "Buddhist Authority Databases." Wiles is a scholar and programmer who works on a set of databases that (as I understand it) provide time, place, and person authority records from Buddhist sources. Wiles's work is sophisticated in how it deals with several Asian languages (which makes this Americanist react in awe), but perhaps most of all in how it is radically open. The databases are publicly searchable, but also publicly downloadable as SQL dumps. This is all the more radical in that the databases are politically charged sources in China. More digital humanities projects could do with this kind of radical openness.

One talk that I regret missing was Julie Meloni's "Toward a Realization of the n-Dimensional Text," the text of which is fortunately available online.