

Feminist Digital Humanities

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I want to begin with a statement about power and privilege. Mine. For if feminism is an analysis of the ways that power is created and reified with a focus on gender, then there is no better place to begin with an inward critical analysis.¹ As Toniesha Taylor argues, “To create a socially just space, we must name privileges.” (2020) What does it mean that I, a white, upper class cis straight woman who is tenured at a research institution in the United States, am writing an entry to feminist digital humanities? Feminism calls us to think through the complicated power dynamics in which we reside, and to write about feminism requires such an analysis to be public. As I’ve been writing this essay I have been thinking about Audrey Lorde and who is not represented by my authorship. (1983) We know that the academy is much like me, not so much like Lorde. Or I might return to Barbara Christian, who in *Black Feminist Criticism* recognized that “few black women critics were willing to claim the term *feminist* in their titles,” in large part due to racism of the white feminist movement (2007, 14) Since I live in Texas I always think about Gloria Anzaldua and her concept of borderlands; “the Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy.” (1987, preface) I start with a discussion of power foregrounded by foundational scholars of color because it reminds us that any feminist intervention into the academy, generally, or the digital humanities, specifically, must address this

¹ This essay enacts two approaches to emphasize a feminist dh approach. First, I am cognizant of who I am citing, following principles laid out by #citeBlack women, with a focus on citing women of color. Second, I name a multitude of names of those associated with my understanding of digital humanities broadly constructed, decentering my voice and centering theirs.

long legacy of tension between white women like me, centered in the academy and in society, and women of color like Lorde and Anzaldua, positioned outside. As an American scholar who works with African-American literature and dh, my thinking regarding feminism particularly focuses on race, but gender, class, sexuality, race, and nation are central for fully understanding power. The same analysis of power is necessary to understand the relationship between feminist digital humanities and digital humanities (dh).

An intersectional framework to consider a feminist digital humanities necessitates engagement with “not only race and gender but also other axes of identity, including class, sexuality and nation, as well as the digital divides emerging from disparities in technological access and inequalities that shade the relationships between particular communities and technologies.” (Bordalejo and Risam 2019, 1) Kimberle Crenshaw, in her 1989 essay that launched the term intersectionality, was clear in that second wave feminism, with a “focus on otherwise-privileged group members,” “creates a distorted analysis of racism and sexism because the operative conceptions of race and sex become grounded in experiences that actually represent only a subset of a much more complex phenomenon.” (1989, 140) To invoke intersectionality as Crenshaw posits is to clearly see white second wave, middle class feminism as a problem in our analysis of privilege and power. The danger of the oft cited intersectionality as used in digital humanities is that white feminists might toss out the concept as a solution without fully engaging in Crenshaw’s target of critique—whiteness. As Jacqueline Wernimont and Elizabeth Losh write, “Feminist digital humanities, in so far as we can say that such a thing exists, has a problem, which can be summarized in one word: whiteness.” (Wernimont and Losh 2017, 35) If we are to enact a feminist digital humanities there can’t JUST be a default to intersectionality without such an analysis. Dorothy Kim points out that “many of our white digital humanities colleagues are

not even passing the litmus test of the ‘baseline,’ which Prescod-Weinstein notes is ‘remembering that Black women exist’ rather than ‘Theorizing about what an intersectional perspective does to our discourse’” (Kim 2019, 46). Or, as Cameron Glover argues, “the co-option of intersectionality has amplified something that BIW+oC have already known: when it comes to our interactions with white women, the anxiety around co-option and culture-vulturing is rooted in its inevitable reality because of the power dynamics that place white women as socially dominant.” Boiling it down: “Intersectionality has never been, nor will it ever be, for white women.” (Glover 2017) I take this analysis as a reminder that there isn’t an easy read on dh feminism because a variety of power structures, shifting among national context and individuals, works to replicate power dynamics within our field based structures, such as conferences and publication venues. In this entry I will think through the ways that systemic bias moves within and throughout the field of digital humanities, suggesting ways that feminist digital humanities practitioners have resisted such biases.

Systemic bias within the digital humanities has been well documented. Martha Nell Smith highlights the retreat into objective approaches as “safe” alternatives to the messy fluidities found in literary studies as foundation to dh, pointing out that “It was as if these matters of objective and hard science provided an oasis for folks who did not want to clutter sharp, disciplined, methodical philosophy with considerations of the gender—, race—, and class—determined facts of life . . . Humanities computing seemed to offer a space free from all this messiness and a return to objective questions of representation.” (2007, 54) Jamie Sky Bianco, who, in analyzing trends in dh, found that “More historically framed, the contemporary drift of noncontent and nonproject-based discussions in the digital humanities often echoes the affective techno-euphoria of the libertarian (white, masculinist, meritocratic) tech boom in the

1990s with its myopic focus on tools and technicity and whose rhetorical self-positioning is expressed as that of a deserving but neglected community finally rising up to their properly privileged social and professional prestige. Unrecognized privilege? From this position, no giant leap of logic is required to understand the allergic aversion to cultural studies and critical theory that has been circulating. It's time for a discussion of the politics and particularly the ethics of the digital humanities as a set of relationships and practices within and outside of institutional structures.” (Bianco 2012). As articulated by Smith and Bianco dh as practiced functions as a matrix of domination as coined by Patricia Hill Collins, a concept that differs from intersectionality in that “the matrix of domination refers to how these intersecting oppressions are actually organized” (Collins 2000, 18) Collins’ matrix of domination provides another lens to understand how organizational structures might prohibit the enactment of feminist digital humanitie(s).

I want to expand these central ideas to consider how such power dynamics play out in a myriad of digital humanities structures, institutional and interpersonal. Dh is, in many ways, one of the truly transnational fields of study, with international digital humanities conferences including scholars from nearly all continents, certainly not a common academic conference attendance profile. Analysis of conference attendance of the ADHO international conferences shows that, ” While the conference remains Americas-centric overall, regional diversity is on the rise, with notable increases of authors from Asia and Oceania, although no scholars affiliated with African countries appeared in this analysis.” (Wingart and Eichmann-Kalwara 2017) Yet the tensions that arise within the field are often due to localized interpretations of scholarship, academic infrastructures, and scholarly research questions, all impacted by localized issues of power in relationship to intersectional concerns. As an interdisciplinary field, dh has a variety of

practices, some of which might be resisted by scholars due to their institutional homes. For example, in the American academy critical race studies has a long history, but in other academies, the scholarly study of race is nearly invisible. Digital humanities itself is institutionalized in very different ways. Gabriele Griffin argues that DH in the US is “much more institutionally established” while “in Sweden, Norway and Finland there are DH centres, laboratories, etc., but no departments.” (2019 968, 969) Grant funding is differently managed, with some nations providing far more robust funding for emergent fields like dh. In some academies women are vastly underrepresented in the professoriate, a charge that might also be leveled against the digital humanities conference: “~35% of DH2015 authors appear to be women, contrasted against ~46% of attendees. Thus attendees are not adequately represented among conference authors. From 2004–2013, North American men seem to represent the largest share of authors by far.” (Wingart and Eichmann-Kalwara 2017) These are but a few of the differentials that present challenges to an international field of study. They are also a reminder that ideas of feminism and its relationship to digital humanities might play out in differing ways yet maintain shared concerns regarding dh’s treatment of gender and the field’s enactment of systemic exclusionary structures.

Central to considering exclusions within digital humanities is the acknowledgment of multiple digital humanitie(s), an idea articulated by Jamie Sky Bianco in her essay “This Digital Humanities Which Is Not One.” (Bianco 2012) Or, as Padmini Ray Murray stated, “my dh is not your dh” (2017). Feminist digital humanities in its multiplicities is an understanding of difference as articulated by Audrey Lorde: “Difference must be not merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic. ... Within the interdependence of mutual (nondominant) differences lies that security which enables us to

descend into the chaos of knowledge and return with true visions of our future, along with the concomitant power to effect those changes which can bring that future into being....But community must not mean a shedding of our differences, nor the pathetic pretense that these differences do not exist.” (1983, 99) Following Lorde’s emphasis on multiplicity, I will outline what I see as the two major issues facing feminist digital humanities: systemic bias within dh infrastructure and a need to decenter the whiteness found in dh theory. These two issues are not binaries, but rather fluid and moving, and demand that practitioners of feminist dh(s) reject systemic bias in infrastructure while also recognizing that excellent dh work has been and is occurring outside of white, masculinist, western dh structures.

To shift structural issues within the field we need “to challenge the ‘add and stir’ model of diversity, a practice of sprinkling in more women, people of colour, disabled folks and assuming that is enough to change current paradigms” (Bailey 2019). Instead, we must look to infrastructures that maintain such paradigms and make interventions that go beyond sprinkling in diversity. Adding a woman of color to a panel is not enough to shift long standing exclusions in the field. Also, given the way that white women have often underpinned systemic exclusions, evidenced most recently by the 52% of white women who voted for Trump, it is important to see clearly who is putting skin in the game, as Taylor notes, and to be sure that we aren’t replicating diversity through the inclusion of white women alone (2019). Feminist digital humanities practices must move beyond theory into action. Here I am not suggesting that every feminist digital humanist must take to the streets. Instead, I am arguing that we must do work that shifts the infrastructure, even when that work exacts a cost. Then, we put skin in the game.

Sometimes feminist digital humanitie(s) is called into action when one is the voice in the room that doesn’t prop up bias by calling out such behavior and demanding change, such as

when Deb Verhoven gave a power talk at the 2015 Digital Humanities conference titled “Has anyone seen a woman?” where she called out the “parade of patriarchs,” the “systemic” and “pervasive” problem in digital humanities, and she refused the practice of “inviting a token female speaker to join you all onstage.” (Verhoven 2017) The rebuff of tokenism, the add and stir approach that Bailey rejects, means that scholars must be prepared to step off or step away from scholarly ventures that are exclusionary, as did Melissa Terras in her decision to step down as a reviewer for *Frontiers in Digital Humanities* due to an all-male editorial board (2015). Other exclusions are due to narrow representations of dh scholarship, as described by Padmini Ray Murray, who discusses the ways that Indian dh resists universal narratives of dh scholarship, (2018) or of Bablola Titilola Aiyegbusi, who argues that “having knowledge of the customs, the digital culture, and the regional academic structure of Africa is pertinent to understanding the development of digital humanities as a field in Africa” (2018, 436) For other scholars, the whiteness of dh is exclusionary. Howard Ramsby notes that “African American scholars occupy the margins of this expansive realm known as Digital Humanities. Do well-intentioned people want more diversity in DH? Sure, they do. Do black folks participate in DH? Of course, we do. But we’ve witnessed far too many DH panels with no African American participants or with only one. We’ve paid close attention to where the major funding for DH goes. Or, we’ve carefully taken note of who the authors of DH-related articles, books, and bibliographies are. We’ve studied these things closely enough to realize who resides in prime DH real estate and who doesn’t.” (2020, 152) I bring these discussions together to reinforce that we cannot press for gender issues alone as we call out dh. Instead we must address the infrastructures of the field as one leg of the matrix of domination.

The yearly ADHO conference, as suggested by the example of Verhoven, has long reinforced a white, western masculinist bias.² Scholars including Roopika Risam, Alex Gil, Élika Ortega, Isabel Galina Russell have been pushing dh to think beyond a western orientation, noting the tension between “‘centers of gravity,’ such as the Digital Humanities annual conference and publications like *Digital Humanities Quarterly* and *Digital Scholarship in the Humanities* and the digital humanities that is happening outside of such centers,” the work of “digital humanities taking place all over the world and in many fields.” (Ortega 2019) Lead by organizations such as GO::DH and through the expansion of constituent organizations under ADHO such as Australasian Association for Digital Humanities (aaDH), Japanese Association for Digital Humanities (JADH), Red de Humanidades Digitales (RedHD), Taiwanese Association for Digital Humanities (TADH), among others, dh has begun to move organizational structures from European and North American domination. Further, the conference has expanded language diversity of paper calls and presentations. Despite such advances, the conference remains a flashpoint for exclusionary behaviors, particularly centered on race and gender. Wernimont and Losh write of their experience in the 2016 Digital Humanities conference in Krakow where they “participated in a panel on feminist infrastructures” that was “grouped together with other marginalized efforts as part of the ‘diversity’ track, which was located in a separate building from the edifice that housed most of the conference sessions” (2018, ix-x) I moderated a panel, “Quality Matters: Diversity and the Digital Humanities in 2016,” with papers given by junior women of color at the same conference which devolved into an ugly question and answer session

² See Weingart S. B., Eichmann-Kalwara N. 2017. “What’s under the big tent?: a study of ADHO conference abstracts. *Digital Studies/Le champ numérique*, 7.1. <https://www.digitalstudies.org/articles/10.16995/dscn.284/> (accessed 19 June 2019) for additional discussion of representation at the ADHO conference.

rife with personal attacks. As the senior white woman chairing the panel it was my job to be a shield³ so that the junior panelists could speak their truths, not in a patronizing manner but as an expenditure of my privilege through allyship, but the Q&A session made clear that many in the room did not see diversity as a subject of import and, when called out for exclusionary behavior, they would attack rather than consider. The consistent message from the ADHO sponsored digital humanities conference has been resistance to topic of cultural studies and diversity as well as the scholars that study such issues. It is no surprise that scholars interested in such topics are gravitating to the annual ACH conference and away from the ADHO conference, as ACH has made clear that they are interested in the very work that ADHO resists through statements such as the 2019 conference: “We particularly invite proposals on anti-racist, queer, postcolonial and decolonial, indigenous, Black studies, cultural and critical ethnic studies, and intersectional feminist interventions in digital studies.” Or, take for example, the 2020 ACH “Black Lives Matter, Structural Racism and Our Organization” statement which stands in stark contrast to ADHO’s silence. The growing gulf between the ACH and ADHO means that those involved with work that the ACH embraces will leave the ADHO structure for ACH, furthering the divide between the western bias of ADHO and the more inclusive outreach of the ACH.

For as long as I have been involved in the digital humanities there have been scholars who have called out the exclusionary impulse of digital humanities infrastructures, movements such as #transformdh or #disruptdh which have created alternative dh centers, yet still the infrastructures resist change. In response scholars are indeed unsubscribing, walking away from dh to alternative centers of work. I still believe that it is important to press dh infrastructures to become more inclusive, but such a response ignores the important work happening outside the

³ Thank you to Toniesha Taylor who helped me think through the enactment of white allyship and who articulated the use of privilege as a shield.

infrastructures of dh, the scholars who choose not to attend dh conferences or publish in dh journals in large part because they do not feel welcome. The add and stir method of diversity has not and will not solve the problems of whiteness and gender in dh. Instead of inviting those who feel excluded to attend and become subject to micro and macro aggressions, I am arguing that those within the infrastructures, particularly white women, need to do the work to make the change. We cannot expect, as often happens with digital humanities, for the lone junior woman of color scholar to shift the entire board of ADHO's digital humanities conference. This is exploitive.

Central to the work of those who are seeking to position feminist approaches within the study of technology are projects like FemTechNet, Intersections | Feminism, Technology & Digital Humanities, and other feminist technology organizations. Often the organizations are expansive, moving beyond concerns of academic digital humanities to concerns of online harassment, digital activism, representation in technology fields, algorithmic bias, etc. Further, a variety of projects position their work as feminist, from projects like the Lili Elbe Digital Archive which “enacted a feminist ethos that constituted community and space in a new way” (Caughie and Datskou 2021, 464), Chicana por mi Raza, a project formed around Chicana feminist praxis, the Digital German Archive, which, among other things, examines feminism across the East and West divide, or Jane Austen's Fiction Manuscripts, among many others. Each of these organizations and projects centers feminism and technology studies, but resists a representation of their work as normative. In large part this is because of the interdisciplinarity of the feminist dh work, which draws upon other scholarly fields of knowledge with long histories of investigation of technologies and the humanities. As Ramsby asks of Black dhers, “...why not also turn our attention to where we voluntarily locate ourselves?” (2020, 153) He goes on to

discuss a broad section of African-American scholars who identify as Tyechia L. Thompson does: “ a scholar of African American literature and digital humanities, in that order. “I do not lead with the digital humanities focus,” she explained, “because my approach to DH is through the lens of Af-Am literature, history and culture.” (Rambsy 2020, 156) In Thompson’s articulation, dh is the outsider field that is grafted onto the study of African-American literature, history, and culture. The best articulations of digital humanitie(s) recognizes that much of the exemplary work is itself centered outside of a rigid notion of dh, instead crossing interdisciplinary boundaries, with new media, critical race studies, post-colonial studies, diaspora studies, critical code studies, disability studies, queer theory and pedagogy studies, among other areas, all central scholarly production locations with long histories. My emphasis on decentering the dh infrastructure is two-fold. First, as Risam notes, “the recent popularity of digital humanities obscures a longer history,” such as the Afrofuturism listserv created by Alondra Nelson in the 1990s. (2019, 19) If we look beyond the Father Busa, great man understanding of dh, if we see other modules of dh as centered, we might then unpack “Why Are the Digital Humanities So White?” (McPherson 2012) Second, by centering other scholarly fields of inquiry we also center the scholars who work in those fields. Moya Z. Bailey’s “All the Digital Humanists Are White, All the Nerds Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave” insists that “By centering the lives of women and people of colour, and disabled folks, the types of possible conversations in digital humanities shift.” Bailey continues “The move ‘from margin to centre’ 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 able-bodiedness” (2011) I quote Bailey at length because her model of

recentering is what I hope to invoke. To understand recentering is to address the issues of the “emerging community of scholars putting intersectionality at the forefront of digital research methods in the humanities.” (Bordalejo and Risam 2019, 5) Scholars that I see as enacting this work may well reject the notion of feminist dh(s) or even dh being applied to their work. Here I want to invoke scholars not to attach them to feminist dh(s) or to coopt their work. Instead, I want to recognize that the work of these scholars provides rich explorations of technological bias, recovery, ethical collaborations, including of labor and citational practices and intellectual genealogies, code studies, and other areas of inquiry that use humanistic approaches to engage with technology.

The power of feminist digital humanities practice is best viewed within the understanding of intersectionality, the multiple impacts of nation, gender, race, sexuality, class and more. Yet we need to be cautious that we do more than use an intersectional lens as a means for actions, for change in problematic dh infrastructures. Intersectionality can't be “the equivalent of a social justice booty call,” as Taylor writes. Instead we must “show up for the projects, protests, marches, and movements that are not directly about you, not to take up space, but to support women of color, the work of feminism will always be incomplete.” (2019, 221) It is this articulation of intersectionality, complete with the work of activism, that must be centered in feminism digital humanities (dh).

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