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DH 8990 – Introduction to Digital Humanities

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Essay #3: My DH Experience

A few months, courses, and experiences later, I took my last Intro to Digital Humanities class last Tuesday and along with it finished my second year in the Spanish PhD program at UVA. I feel accomplished and nervous while contemplating the next steps in the program and in my training to become a DH Caribbeanist scholar. Among these coming-soon steps are my comprehensive exams, my first travel venture into archival research, and a year-long DH training program thanks to the Praxis Fellowship I received recently. As I prepare to embark in the next stages, however, I also worry how I may cohesively interconnect my interest in the digital humanities with my work as a contemporary Caribbeanist because my advisors worry I spend too much time on DH projects rather than my own research. “You are too dispersed,” is what they said, and they are probably right. Sometimes, it is difficult to discern whether I am intently working on DH or procrastinating with it—it’s just that it is so fun! And yet, I have a hunch that more than “dispersed,” my problem is that I have still to learn how to integrate the two major fields of my academic identity. Possibly, reflecting on all the DH work I have done this semester can help my cause.

When I read back the main goals and values, I identified for myself in the first autobiographic piece I wrote for the class, I was happy to confirm that they remain essentially the same. I want to master digital humanities as a critical, multilingual, and creative practice that can both help me better understand the Caribbean and enable me to effectively share any

research of mine with the people from the Islands who do not have specialized knowledge. These two areas constitute the core for my ideal future-self, and I intend for them to inform everything I do, from traditional close-reading analyses to critical multimodal projects on Caribbean culture. I am aware that this degree of interconnection requires a high level of critical thought and efficient organization as well as managerial skills, which is why, for me, Rennie Mapp's visit to our Intro to DH class was an eye-opening experience. Her reasons to undergo an MBA program and her reflections on how much this degree successfully prepared her to tackle her role as project manager for DH Initiatives at UVA outlined for me how important business management skills can be for anyone, really, but especially for graduate students and aspiring digital humanists. Her visit changed my perspective about my own approach to research and work as a Research Assistant for the Multepal Project. It made me realize how much management work is involved in DH's aim toward "scholarship and pedagogy that are bound up with infrastructure in ways that are deeper and more explicit than we are generally accustomed to" as Matthew Kirschenbaum defines it ("What Is Digital Humanities and What's It Doing in English Departments?" 9). Inspired by this realization, I consulted online guides on business principles and task management systems and began using Trello, Outlook Tasks, and Asana to handle my own work and extracurricular commitments. It has definitely made my days more productive and my semester more manageable.

In retrospect, I believe the guest lectures were a key and very successful component of the course because we got a glimpse of different people's trajectories into DH, and this is a rare opportunity. In addition to the Rennie Mapp visit, I found Brandon Walsh's journey to become a part of the Scholar's Lab to be greatly relatable. His trajectory is a fantastic model to look up to when I am struggling for examples and ways in which I can participate within the field's

community. It was reassuring, too, hearing Brandon discuss his extracurricular efforts to acquire the technical knowledge required for the histograms he made in order to finish his dissertation chapter on sound and literary studies of Virginia Woolf's writing. His example showcased not only the extensive amount of extracurricular work required, but also the highly collaborative environment that seeking help and identifying a suitable DH method put him in. The bottom line is that producing high quality DH work is best done in the company of brilliant others and you should begin by surveying the tools that are out there in the field, such as the HathiTrust Digital Library. From his visit, I gleaned the importance of reaching out to other people and working very hard, yes, but working with others and building on others' work.

I realize that although I found all guest lectures to be quite useful and stimulating, the ones that had greater impact on me, and thus the ones I chose to discuss a few lines earlier, were those that focused more heavily on practical matters over critical academic discussions. For similar reasons, I believe I gained more knowledge from completing the course assignments than by making my way through the readings. Or perhaps that is not right. I did learn a great deal from the articles, especially those that were as invested as they were skeptical about DH methods like Richard Jean So and Edwin Roland's "Race and Distant Reading" (2020). I also enjoyed a lot the discussions from "The HathiTrust Digital Library's Potential for Musicology Research" because it breaks down the library to its components and frames them in the context of a particular avenue of inquiry. Reading that article felt like hacking into the brain of a librarian offering a consultation to musicologists. Nonetheless, I feel that the practical training the assignments provided will be more immediately useful for me at the point where I am right now in my scholarly training.

My favorite task was the curricular intervention because we had several options to shape how we wanted to offer a contribution to the course. In my view, this was a refreshing twist to the traditional class presentation format where graduate students lead the discussion on a set of readings or present a snapshot of their final project. As a challenge to try something new, I collaborated with my two brilliant friends and colleagues, Samantha Stephens and Seanna Viechweg, and we carried out a workshop on advanced searching using the TAGS online scraper. Not only did we learn a great deal about search engines, APIs, and easy dataset creation, but we also engaged in teaching a tool to a group, which was a new experience for all of us. I had been eager to teach using the workshop format for some time now because it is a condensed and precise teaching method. Also, it is quite popular among librarians and digital humanists. Prior to this class, I had thought that finding a space and a crowd to develop workshopping skills would be difficult as a graduate student, so I felt very thankful for having such an eclectic and wonderful audience to initiate the three of us in the art of workshops.

As for the other assignments, I think the project assessment worksheet was quite helpful because it allowed me to pay closer attention to the building blocks and sections than I had done before. In addition, it is a great asset to have in hand when I am working on building my own digital projects. To me, this worksheet works great for evaluating a project as much as it works for planning and developing your own and, although they were not directly related, I can see how the clarity in project articulation it fosters connects well with the textual legibility that the autobiographies and blog writing activities. One of the challenges of DH for me, is that oftentimes it aims to be accessible to a wider, non-specialist public and, while I do want to increase my work's accessibility as much as possible, I am not accustomed to changing writing

styles. Thus, working on writing genres that touch on but diverge from academic writing was very difficult but useful to me.

In this sense, I feel that what I need to do is heed the advice from Raf Alvarado in his “Digital Humanities and the Great Project” article and operationalize my approach to Caribbean research and DH. Instead of attempting to work on DH work on the one hand and Caribbean cultural studies on the other, I need to find a nexus that allows both critical spheres to communicate better, fuse, and become a coherent critical practice. To do so, I sense that I need to sit down and write the simplest, barest characteristics of both fields to find similarities that can allow me to draw bigger, broader connections. My idea is that this approach would let me in to finally work fully in the integration of Caribbean Digital Humanities that would enable me to stretch my energies less but work more efficiently in the direction of the questions I seek answers to. Up to this point, my approach to DH had been lukewarm in that I chose to learn it as a practice that would only cross Caribbean studies in the future, but now I feel that if I don’t start working on both fields at the same time, I simply won’t have enough time to learn enough in order to build my own original critical engagement idea and carve out a professional path that suits me well. Looking at my “dispersion” issues from this angle, it feels more and more that it is just part of the natural growth process because I am attempting to blend two disciplines. It makes sense that I am “disperse,” and I will try to enjoy it because as much angst-inducing as it is, it also opens the doors to new collaborations, ideas and, who knows? Maybe I can help build new subfields within Multilingual DH in a not-so-distant future.