

BOOK REVIEW

Bodies of Information: Intersectional Feminism and Digital Humanities

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At the very moment when the Digital Humanities has begun to reckon with its own exclusionary paradigms, *Bodies of Information* is a timely contribution that confronts the persistent “trivialization” of intersectional feminist methodologies within the field (ix). Drafted during the twilight of the Obama presidency and the attendant rise of populism and gratuitous hate ideologies, this edited volume continued to resonate during a global pandemic that has exacerbated existing inequities and backlashes against intersectional and decolonial scholarship, and as the trial of Derek Chauvin marked a welcome yet grim milestone in a resurgent Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. Alongside recent influential publications like *Algorithms of Oppression* (Noble 2018) and *Data Feminism* (D’Ignazio and Klein 2019), and work on hidden and feminized labour in the Digital Humanities (Nyhan 2022), *Bodies* is part of a flourishing social justice pedagogy and feminist critique of digital humanities, of the myth of technological “objectivity” and “neutrality,” of masculinist origin stories of the field, its inequities, exclusions, as well as its feminist possibilities. As such, an ethical and social justice imperative animates these contributions, whether in working with communities, within the academic system, or on projects that respond directly to systemic injustices in society. In demonstrating the value of intersectional feminism in digital humanities work, *Bodies of Information* attends to these more-than-academic entanglements of digital humanities and the lived experiences of, and resistance to, racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, classism, ableism, state and institutional violence (ix) within and through technologies.

It is worth noting at the outset that this volume is available open access online through Manifold, an open-source platform for scholarly publishing that facilitates collaborative annotation. Economic barriers to scholarship are bound up with the systems of power and privilege that the authors seek to dismantle; this type of free and enhanced access is a countermeasure to these privations. Intended as a textbook, this volume offers a range of introductory as well as more challenging essays, a mix of case studies and more theoretical contributions. Chapters are organized around six keywords as “boundary objects” (xiii) in order to draw out common threads between the diversity of essays. In assembling such volumes, a major challenge is to avoid simply presenting a list of case studies and to create meaningful connections between them, and the editors have managed this deftly. It is clear that they have resisted easy categorization,

inviting us to think through the essays' diffuse and subtle entanglements. There are indeed innumerable connections across chapters such that, arguably, this volume could be arranged through many permutations. Thematic arrangement is based on the "MEALS framework" proposed by the editors: "shorthand for a feminist emphasis on how the 'material, embodied, affective, labor-intensive, and situated character of engagements with computation can operate experientially for users in shared spaces'" (xiii). With the additional parameter of "Values," this framing is employed to underline the fact that technologies are not and have never been "neutral" entities, but equally that there are multiple value systems that intersect in these "technosocial environments" (xii).

Drawing together a diverse authorship, the essays address many critical issues within DH such as, *inter alia*, representation, hidden and devalued labor, gender and sexual binaries, de-colonial praxis and perspectives. They cut across areas such as artistic data visualization, text analysis, quantitative studies, queer theory, social media, game studies, and digital archives. Some themes of interest that recur are the relationship between technology and human subjectivities, the quandary of social media as a site of recovery, evidence, and vulnerability, scholarly privilege and positionality, postcolonial DH, and the archival nature of data. Indeed, several chapters (those by Michelle Schwartz and Constance Crompton; Bonnie Ruberg, Jason Boyd, and James Howe; Dorothy Kim; Padmina Ray Murray) hold interest for students of archival studies, a discipline with a well-established history of renegotiating its own profoundly ingrained paradigms of professional "neutrality" and "'unnamed' universals in archival appraisal" (Caswell 2019, 8). For example, Alison Hedley and Lorraine Janzen Kooistra's development of a "personography" of Victorian literati disrupts binary classifications of gender identity and draws attention to the multiple gender identifications of authors who have been hidden and threaded across the archival record, reminding us that "'person' is neither self-evident nor transhistorical" (159). Archival studies is, particularly through digitization, digital history, and information systems, proximate with digital humanities. Many of these case studies are founded in the datafication of cultural heritage, particularly the documentary and the literary record, which are implicated in their own systems of valuation and cultural hegemony, refracted again through digital humanities.

Roopika Risam, whose broader work also concerns the digital cultural record, demonstrates how the (white, European, heteronormative) "universal" human subject is encoded in and renaturalized through machine-learning algorithms that function as AI, in this case robots and "humanoid text," and that are increasingly being looked to for processing, organizing, and presenting cultural data for human consumption. Such "algorithmic universals" (46) are by design "algorithms of oppression" (Noble 2018). Undoubtedly there is growing awareness and critique of racialized programming, the like of which Safiya Noble's work on search engines has exposed. Heightened perhaps by the spectacle of the algorithm in social networks and the ways in which they are manipulated in elections, political messaging, and racial profiling, this awareness has transcended academia to become a digital and human rights issue, making Risam's case studies all the more cogent. Without disavowing the importance of feminist reclamation work, Julia Flanders's contribution troubles the making visible of categories of marginalized identity such as gender in cataloguing and information systems. Failing to identify the white male proxy, she argues, "cedes neutrality and centrality to the unmarked category," that is to say, the "universal" subject raised by Risam (296); equally, gender as a vector of identity and description risks reinstating traditional gender binaries at odds with changing cultural norms and values. Flanders teases out

these “politics of difference” that permeates technical systems and tools, and the normative “maker culture” (298) that underpins them. In doing so, this chapter impresses upon readers the layers of nuance, complexity, and contradictions of such work, but also the fraught task of then “building otherwise” as a social justice imperative—an enduring motif of this volume.

Most saliently, the editors contend that “this volume reflects how feminist collectives and communities are making a difference in changing the digital humanities in particular and institutional cultures generally” (xiii). Flanders, in this vein, also roundly critiques the politics of “building” itself as a frame of professional value in the digital humanities and pondering her own gender positionality in this matrix. It is indeed the sometimes deeply personal reflections on the authors’ own bodies as interfaces in relation to academic structures that makes this a compelling volume, reminding us with urgency that “the body” is both abstract and a lived site of resistance. One of the more vivid of these is micha cárdenas’s UNSTOPPABLE project to create affordable bulletproof clothing for black trans women who are disproportionately at risk of homicide in the US. Another reflection on the emotional labor of digital outreach that is not always readily accepted as legitimately “academic,” Marcia Chatelain’s essay speaks to the ways in which, as Kim Gallon reminds us, “Black people’s subsistence in and resistance to the complex oppressive systems of slavery, colonialism, Jim Crow, mass incarceration, and police brutality, across time and space, make black lives ground zero for a technology of recovery using social media” (Gallon 2016, 44). Chatelain recalls her Twitter campaign, #FergusonSyllabus, to encourage educators to dedicate their first day of classes to discussing race, civil rights, and policing following the Ferguson events when police shot and killed an unarmed Black teenager in 2014. Her reflection brings out the tension between social media as a powerful “technology of recovery” (42) and as a site of risk and vulnerability for black women speaking out. Social media and other digital tools are often the only avenues left to feminist scholars in precarious employment to make their voices heard and to make historical subjectivities more widely visible at such moments, or such as in times of national commemoration and remembrance. It is also far from a given that such transformative public impact is reciprocated with a permanent university job. Ruberg, Boyd, and Howe, in making the case for Queer DH, likewise recognize both the possibilities and pitfalls of digital tools and spaces, echoing Chatelain’s experience in that “queer subjects working in digital humanities face real risks in pushing the field in more inclusive directions” (113). Undeniably, the burden of proof—and as above, the burden of self-protection—is so much higher for people of colour in the criminal justice system in the US and beyond, as has been highlighted again and again since this book first appeared. Social media as a tool for making visible police violence, a powerful “technology of recovery” in another sense, is also visited by Beth Coleman, who brings together three types of networked “data publics” (395) to rethink the contingencies of “big” and “small” (or “shadow”) data (397) in actualizing the BLM movement in mainstream discourse. Such data is both evidentiary and represents a timeline of activism and its effectiveness.

As already indicated, a recurrent theme and strength of the book is that it interrogates the politics of digital humanities not alone as theory and practice, but as a discipline implicated in what Danielle Cole and colleagues call the “academic industrial complex” (60). Threaded across several essays is a critique of the academic and funding structures, associated value systems, and the hurdles and barriers they create for attending to feminist DH. Cole and colleagues’ guide for navigating grant-funding protocols (or the “grant industrial complex”) (60), which privilege project contributors who are

already financially stable, is an impassioned call for practicing critical academia in community digital humanities. Taking this discussion of best practice further, Amy Earhart grapples with questions of data ethics, ownership, and community collaboration ranging from digitization, to the ethics of Twitter as data, to the manipulation of data for research. The digitization and datafication of cultural materials—but equally the use of contemporary data—for humanities research risks creating cognitive dissonance between those of us who extract and use them for research, and their creators. Earhart reminds us of the relationships that may exist between data exploitation and the historical exploitation of people, asking that we radically decenter academic ideas of extraction and ownership and attend to the cultural specificities of communities in a chapter that is highly reminiscent of community archives literature: “recognition of one’s own experience in relationship to complex positionality is crucial to understanding how we, as digital humanities scholars, might work in ethical, nonexploitive ways” (371).

At the beginning of this volume, the editors set the scene by describing the marginalization of diversity track panels at the Alliance of Digital Humanities Organizations (ADHO) conference in 2016, and how it prompted a public conversation about exclusion and intersectionality in DH. This is further teased out in Nickoal Eichmann-Kalwara, Jeana Jorgensen, and Scott B. Weingart’s chapter interrogating gender representation in DH conferences since the early 2000s. Barbara Bordalejo’s chapter in particular exposes the differential treatment of racial and ethnic minorities in DH conference submissions, as part of a wider exploratory survey conducted to ascertain the state of representation in the field. It also indicates, or rather confirms, a white, Anglophone, Global North dominance. Speaking to this, Babalola Titilola Aiyegbusi introduces the state of the digital humanities in African nations, focusing on Nigeria, and is a reminder that the differential development of DH and a DH community of practice in Global North and Global South contexts is also nationally specific and reflects particular structural, economic, and cultural realities that must be attended to in Western discourses of “inclusion.” Such work is extending and challenging our understanding of such local/national contexts but also the intersections of—and interstices between—digital humanities, globalization, and feminism. Though the editors acknowledge the concentration of essays in mostly Global North contexts (which is not to say divorced from them), Aiyegbusi’s essay, as well as Murray’s on South Asian feminist protest in online spaces and the digital archive, in particular, signpost scholarship that is working to disrupt this geo-cultural hegemony. As Murray points out, the development of DH in India is itself commensurate with a wider challenge to the colonial legacy of knowledge transmission in university curricula.

Feminist critique in the digital humanities has evolved rapidly in the past ten years, exposing the ways in which the field has reified normative structures of power, privilege, and identity behind the guise of innovation, collaboration, and technologically justified “objectivity.” However, considerable work remains to do on this front. This book advances the field of Digital Humanities, or rather “critical digital humanities” (xv), by centering intersectional feminism as praxis and extending questions of methodology, both how current approaches are incubators of these normative dynamics, but also rethinking and rebuilding methodologies reflexively and, crucially, the institutional frameworks in which we as scholars operate. MEALS is a starting point and a critical toolkit that the editors invite us take forward in future feminist DH. Just as Tara McPherson’s thesis on the modularization of technology and culture as implicitly raced and camouflaging complexity has made plain, this volume asks us to embrace

the layered and lateral nature of the problem. More often we see the polished results of DH research made palatable for publication, whereas authors are refreshingly honest and reflexive about the trials of their work and in thinking through the significant problems of method and positionality in dealing with and communicating techno-cultural complexity. Finally, in advancing feminist DH, this book impresses upon readers how this work is at its core an ethical endeavor, involving both “care *and* repair” (ix, my emphasis), and demands reflexivity of us as scholars and as part of the university apparatus, and particularly those of us who may embody both marginalized and oppressor standpoints (Caswell 2019).

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