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Introduction

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Introduction

Cover Page Footnote

I would like to thank Andrew H. Lee for commenting on the introduction and bringing this special issue together as the Managing Editor of BASPHS. Together, we would both like to thank the contributing authors and anonymous peer reviewers—from within and beyond the Association for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies—who made this special issue possible.

Introduction

Digital Humanities Special Issue

Andrea Davis

Over the last decade, much of the public discourse on the digital humanities has swung between those who hail it as the next big thing and those who deride it as “interpretively inert.”¹ Although opposed, both positions treat the digital humanities as a “construct” rather than a concrete body of scholarship built on shared technological and methodological foundations.² This special issue moves beyond the digital humanities construct by focusing on concrete examples of digital humanities work to assess its impact and future in Iberian historical studies.

Bringing together articles that range in focus from the medieval to the contemporary and from the Iberian Peninsula to the Atlantic World, this issue showcases an array of digital humanities methods, including, but not limited to: text encoding, thick mapping, and crowdsourced transcription. Amidst this breadth and diversity, three common themes emerge: the construction of Iberian historical data, methods for teaching Iberian history, and modes of communicating historical knowledge about Iberia. In focusing on these three themes, the aim of this introduction is not to reify the distinction between the traditional and digital humanities, but to make the case that these conversations are relevant to all practitioners of Iberian historical studies.

Constructing Iberian Historical Data

‘Data’ can be a difficult term for humanists. As Miriam Posner of the Department of Information Studies at UCLA explains:

When you call something data, you imply that it exists in discrete, fungible units; that it is computationally tractable; that its meaningful qualities can be enumerated in a finite list; that someone else performing the same operations on the same data will

¹ Patricia Cohen, “Humanities Scholars Embrace Digital Technology,” *The New York Times*, November 16, 2010, sec. Arts, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/17/arts/17digital.html>; Stanley Fish, “Stop Trying to Sell the Humanities,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 17, 2018, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Stop-Trying-to-Sell-the/243643>. There are also those who treat the digital humanities as a weapon wielded by neoliberal administrators. See especially, Daniel Allington, Sarah Brouillette, David Golumbia, “Neoliberal Tools (and Archives): A Political History of Digital Humanities,” *Los Angeles Review of Books* May 1, 2016 <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/neoliberal-tools-archives-political-history-digital-humanities>.

² Matthew Kirschenbaum, “What Is ‘Digital Humanities,’ and Why Are They Saying Such Terrible Things about It?” *Differences* 25, no. 1 (2014): 46–63 <https://mkirschenbaum.files.wordpress.com/2014/04/dhterriblethingskirschenbaum.pdf>

come up with the same results. This is not how humanists think of the material they work with.³

Despite discomfort with the term, humanists today engage with data on a regular basis. The data that shapes our professional lives can be defined as “a digital, selectively constructed, machine-actionable abstraction representing some aspects of a given object of humanistic inquiry.”⁴ As this definition suggests, the state of our data—and its utility for research—depends upon the construction process. For analogue objects, the process begins with digitization. From there, both digitized and born-digital objects need to be curated, structured and/or annotated to facilitate human and computational analysis.

As multiple articles in this special issue stress, humanities scholars can and should play an active role in the construction process through the creation of datasets, collections (recently conceived as data), and editions.⁵ Our skills as humanists are needed not only to represent the complex literary and historical characteristics of our sources, but to ensure that our data is ethically and—when laws, regulations, and ethics allow—openly formatted to promote data reuse and sharing.⁶

In “Deciphering Secrets of Medieval Cathedrals: Crowdsourced Manuscript Transcriptions on Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Coexistence,” Roger Louis Martinez-Davila, Sean Perrone, Francisco Garcia Serrano-Nebras, and Maria Martin de Vidales Garcia discuss [Deciphering Secrets](#), a large-scale transcription project of medieval manuscripts from the cathedral chapters of Burgos, Plasencia, and Toledo. Linked to a series of massive open online courses (MOOCs), the article demonstrates how the project’s paleography methods and assignment structure increases the accuracy of crowdsourced transcriptions. Reflecting on the project’s next steps, the authors consider digitally editing and text-mining the collected transcriptions—methods that are given full treatment in the contributions by Clayton McCarl and Elisa Garrido. In “XML Multiple-Layered Encoding as an Editorial and Pedagogical Strategy for Colonial Latin American Studies,” Clayton McCarl reflects on his approach to digital

³ Miriam Posner, “Humanities Data: A Necessary Contradiction,” *Miriam Posner’s Blog*, June 25, 2015, <http://miriamposner.com/blog/humanities-data-a-necessary-contradiction/>.

⁴ Christof Schöch, “Big? Smart? Clean? Messy? Data in the Humanities,” *Journal of Digital Humanities* 2, no. 3 (2013) <http://journalofdigitalhumanities.org/2-3/big-smart-clean-messy-data-in-the-humanities/>.

⁵ “The Santa Barbara Statement on Collections as Data, Version 2” Always Already Computational — Collections as Data, accessed September 18, 2018, <https://collectionsasdata.github.io/statement/>.

⁶ There are growing bodies of literature on digital representation, ethics, and access, all of which call upon scholars to critically engage with and/or design information infrastructures for the web. For a short introduction to issues of representation, see Megan Garcia, “Racist in the Machine: The Disturbing Implications of Algorithmic Bias,” *World Policy Journal* 33, no. 4 (2016):111–117. For a longer discussion consult, Safiya Umoja Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (New York: NYU Press) 2018. A good overview of ethics can be found in Deni Elliott and Edward H. Spence, *Ethics for a Digital Era* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2018). For access, follow the open-access, open educational resources, and universal design movements.

textual editing. Through the multi-level encoding of Colonial Latin American texts, McCarl scaffolds information to “detail the editorial interventions involved in two transformations: the passage of the text from the manuscript image to the transcription, and from the transcription to a modernized version.” This approach provides readers with a transparent view of the editorial process, increases the longevity and “reusability” of the edition, and facilitates the edition’s incorporation into larger datasets that make new forms of humanistic inquiry and analysis possible. Elisa Garrido examines one such form of analysis in “Exploring North-South Identities Using NLP: The Image of Spain in the German Weekly *Die Zeit*.” Applying methods from natural language processing (NLP), Garrido analyzes the *Die Zeit* corpus using the web-based tool [DiaCollo](#) to understand German perceptions of Spain. In addition to explaining the statistical methods undergirding digital text corpora analysis, Garrido invites us into her research process to show how computational analysis guides, rather than replaces, qualitative analysis.

Teaching Iberian History

In addition to shaping research agendas, the digital humanities can be used to design high-impact learning opportunities that foreground problem solving, project building, and public engagement. Using the digital humanities for these ends, as literary scholars Claire Battershill and Shawna Ross explain in their recent practical guide *Using Digital Humanities in the Classroom*, does not necessitate expertise, so much as a willingness to “benefit from some of DH’s offerings, finding not only exciting possibilities for new classroom activities and assignments, but also inspiration to reconfigure your vision of your own discipline and its relationship to new media and technologies.”⁷ More than a matter of classroom instruction, these teaching methods and disciplinary reconfigurations have become central to broader debates about the future of higher education in the digital age.⁸

In “From the Spanish Atlantic Colonial Archives to the Classroom in the Arctic: Perspectives on Linking Digital Projects and Undergraduate Research in History,” Rachael Ball and undergraduate students Caroline Streff, Brittney Anderson, Lauren Caraghar, and John Macy discuss the [Cuba in the Classroom Digital Archive](#), which increases access to archival materials for classroom use via the acquisition, transcription, translation, and historical introduction to digitized sources from the Archivo Nacional de Cuba and Biblioteca Nacional de Cuba José Martí. As a pedagogical innovation in and of itself, the project provides students with additional

⁷ Claire Battershill and Shawna Ross, *Using Digital Humanities in the Classroom: A Practical Introduction for Teachers, Lecturers, and Students* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 2. You can consult the free web companion for the book at: <http://scalar.usc.edu/works/digital-humanities-in-the-classroom-a-practical-introduction/index>.

⁸ See especially Cathy N. Davidson, *The New Education: How to Revolutionize the University to Prepare Students for a World In Flux* (New York: Basic Books, 2017). For a discipline specific conversation, see Sam Wineburg, *Why Learn History (When It’s Already on Your Phone)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).

faculty mentorship and research opportunities as interns and, laudably, article co-authors. Whereas Ball et al. situate their article within the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) literature, Mirzam C. Perez approaches pedagogy from the perspective of course design. In “Undergraduate Research, Student-Student Mentoring, and Student-Faculty Collaboration in a DH-Intensive Seminar on Early Modern Spanish Cities,” Perez presents [Designing Empires](#), a Spanish undergraduate seminar and ongoing digital public humanities project that examines “how Spanish Habsburg Monarchs employed the founding of cities as a tool of imperial legitimacy.” In the article, Perez provides a wealth of practical advice for instructors, including, how to integrate digital tools into the classroom, manage consequent anxieties, and scaffold assignments to produce collaborative and public-facing projects. Perhaps less intentionally, the article also sheds light on the state of digital humanities instruction across U.S. college campuses, which is often shaped not by formal programs, but by: dedicated centers or clusters of interested faculty, librarians, and IT specialists; external grants supporting faculty development; and institution-wide curricular objectives and investments in digital infrastructure.

Communicating Historical Knowledge about Iberia

The final three articles deal with communication. Interrogating the affordances of different digital mediums, the authors consider a range of questions, including: how historical knowledge is communicated; who participates in historical dialogue and for what purposes; and whose knowledge is communicated as history. Foster Chamberlin, host of the Spanish history interview podcast [Historias](#), surveys podcasting in “Podcasting Historias: Public Outreach through Digital Storytelling in Iberian History.” As a unique form of knowledge creation shaped by its serialized and web-based audio format, Chamberlin argues that academic podcasting not only increases public access to scholarship, but is “one of the simplest and most accessible ways in which Iberian historians can contribute to the digital humanities.” Moving from serialized interviews to oral history interviews, Luis Martín-Cabrera and Andrea Davis discuss the [Spanish Civil War Memory Project](#) in “The Spanish Civil War Memory Project: Constructing and Enhancing a Digital Archive.” Situating the project within the history of Republican exile, intellectual resistance to the Francoist dictatorship, and the rise of a memorialist movement in Spain, Martín-Cabrera and Davis argue that the audiovisual testimonies constitute an alternative form of historical knowledge and discuss their current efforts to enhance and disseminate the archive using digital public humanities methods and tools. Wendy Perla-Kurtz continues the discussion of the memorialist movement in her article “Mediating Memory: Digital Culture and Mass Grave Recovery in the Iberian Peninsula.” Based on her thick mapping project [Virtual Cartographies](#), Perla-Kurtz uses multimedia texts to analyze and give “polyphonic voice” to place-based rituals of reburial and commemoration at grave sites throughout Spain.

Common Threads

By way of conclusion, we would like to discuss some common threads that run through the eight articles comprising this special issue. The first is collaboration. Collaboration across institutions and disciplines; collaboration between researchers, archivists, technologists, and activists; and collaboration among students and faculty within and beyond the classroom.⁹ With this issue, we hope to reinforce this collaborative trend in Iberian historical studies by connecting readers with ongoing projects and models for developing and managing digital humanities projects of their own. The second common thread is labor. As Robin Wharton writes in the 2018 edited volume *Disrupting the Digital Humanities*, the collaborative nature of digital humanities work invites us to ignore or “actively defy institutionalized hierarchies of labor.”¹⁰ We embrace this movement by reiterating that those who participate in our digital scholarship—be they technologists, librarians, students, involved communities, or members of the broader public—be treated and recognized as intellectual partners. The third and final thread is how digital humanists, in McCarl’s words, “position ourselves differently as scholars.” This may mean engaging in work that “blurs distinctions between research, teaching and service” or participating in projects that do not yield immediate results in terms of historical interpretation, but pave the way for future developments in the field.¹¹ We believe this work contributes to the overall health and well-being of our scholarly ecosystem, and encourage our readers to recognize it as scholarship in their roles as peer reviewers and committee members.¹²

⁹ As Bethany Nowviskie writes, “digital scholarship happens within complex networks of human production. In some cases, these networks are simply heightened versions of the relationships and codependencies which characterized the book-and-journal trade; and in some cases they are truly incommensurate with what came before.” “Where Credit Is Due,” *Bethany Nowviskie’s Blog*, May 31, 2011. <http://nowviskie.org/2011/where-credit-is-due/>.

¹⁰ Robin Wharton, “Bend until it Breaks: Digital Humanities and Resistance,” in *Disrupting the Digital Humanities*, ed. Dorothy Kim and Jesse Stommel (Santa Barbara, CA: Punctum Books, 2018) 385.

¹¹ Jesse Stommel, “The Public Digital Humanities,” in *Disrupting the Digital Humanities*, ed. Dorothy Kim and Jesse Stommel (Santa Barbara, CA: Punctum Books, 2018), 84.

¹² For discipline specific guidelines, see American Historical Association, “Guidelines for the Professional Evaluation of Digital Scholarship by Historians” (June 2015): <https://www.historians.org/teaching-and-learning/digital-history-resources/evaluation-of-digital-scholarship-in-history/guidelines-for-the-professional-evaluation-of-digital-scholarship-by-historians>; and Arguing with Digital History working group, “Digital History and Argument,” white paper, Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media (November 13, 2017): <https://rrchnm.org/argument-white-paper/>.