

# Transformative Digital Humanities: Challenges and Opportunities

Balkun, Mary McAleer, and Marta Mestrovic Deyrup. 2020. *Transformative Digital Humanities: Challenges and Opportunities*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

Sounding like a cigarette ad from the 1970s, Susan Scribeman opens her introduction to *Transformative Digital Humanities: Challenges and Opportunities* with the observation, “Digital Humanities has come a long way” (xiv). It sure has. Even back in 2011, when Stanley Fish started blogging disapprovingly about Digital Humanities (DH) for the *New York Times*, digital humanists were already concerned with the idea of “transformation,” and, in the editors’ preface to this volume, Mary McAleer Balkun and Marta Mestrovic Deyrup detail and historicize the range of valence that idea possesses for DH. It was also in 2011 that scholars at the American Studies Association annual conference interested in digital humanities banded together to form #TransformDH, which would be dedicated to “a digital humanities of transformative research, pedagogy, and activism for social justice, accessibility, and inclusion.” With an accent on the political over the technical and an investment in interrogating the intersectional structures of race, class, and gender, #TransformDH also looked to marginalized media artists and activists working outside the academy as collaborators. In a similar vein, Miriam Posner stressed in 2015 the need for investigating the technical and institutional infrastructure of digital humanities and for examining critically how this infrastructure transforms scholarship and scholars, even as scholars believe they are transforming those infrastructures by the work they produce (Posner 2015). Along with calls to decolonize digital humanities, the move toward globalizing DH, with particular attention paid to local knowledges, greater community access, and acknowledgement and support for work done outside the global north, has become requisite for advancing DH as a transformative scholastic enterprise. (Over half the chapters in the book cover non-US topics.) At the same time, scholars working in cultural heritage began to recognize digital humanities’ transformative potential, insofar as it was “at the forefront of tackling crucial issues such as intellectual property, cultural memory and identity, and communication and creativity in a digital age.”

Perhaps it’s telling that the digital humanist English professors Andrew Goldstone and Ted Underwood (2014) entitled their computational analysis of literature scholarship “The Quiet Transformations of Literary Studies,” because, in the *longue durée*, transformations in humanities scholarship are often subtle, modulated, and tectonic. And indeed, the discussions in *Transformative Digital Humanities* are the kind of “quiet transformations” Goldstone and Underwood’s work reveals. Gathering together thirteen chapters, grouped thematically into four sections (“Interventions,” “Architecture/infrastructure,” “A (New) Community of Practice,” “Discovery and Recovery”), the volume embraces Amanda Visconti’s (2016) injunction to know DH by knowing the myriad projects and collaborations done in its name. Emphasizing the transformative “potential” of DH, Balkun and Deyrup present those projects and collaborations as object lessons, whether for emulation elsewhere or as cautionary tales. Each chapter is a case study, each case study a collaborative enterprise, and most contributions collaboratively written. And many of those collaborations involve or are led by

librarians; indeed, half of the contributors are librarians or library-based, and one of the volume's editors is a librarian.

While each of the four sections includes at least one librarian contributor or discusses libraries, Section II: "Architectures and Infrastructures" is exclusively library-focused and librarian-authored. As Michael Kicey and Jessica Clemons of SUNY-Buffalo Libraries (perhaps debatably) declare in the first sentence of their chapter, "The movement towards digital humanities (DH) began in libraries" (53). In "Augmented Reading: Digital Libraries as Proponents of Digital Humanities," the authors reflect on the role libraries can play by leveraging their resources to enhance the experience of reading through the data the library holds and to which it can link. In so doing, "opening out to the viewpoint of process, to every conceivable form of philological and statistical analysis, data visualization, and literary commentary" (63). Moving from data to services, "Specialized Information Programs as a Service for Academic Libraries Researchers at German Academic Libraries," by Sandra Simon and Timo Steyer, focuses on how libraries must act in tandem with the research community to sustain and grow digital humanities projects. Simon and Steyer provide development of a liaison program as evidence libraries can act as intermediaries to offer expertise in metadata and data curation, as well as their capacity to act as "information brokers" to scholars working in a highly decentralized system. Moving toward greater access, Cuijuan Xia and Xue-Ming Bao's chapter illustrates how the Shanghai Library's development of databases for genealogy, name authority, and a union catalog of ancient Chinese books has afforded users easier and more comprehensive ways of identifying and retrieving relevant information for research. As with the previous chapters in the section, this chapter highlights how the library and librarians can draw on the work they currently do to support DH scholarship but not necessarily participate collaboratively in its creation.

The library as the locus of digital humanities work is also reflected heavily in Section III, "A (New) Community of Practice." In their chapter, librarians H el ene Huet and Suzan Alteri explain the development of a successful, library-based graduate internship program that enables students to participate at a high level in ongoing library digital projects while also acquainting them with the broad ambit of digital activity the library enables and sustains. Among those areas of digital activity that fall within the library's remit, digital preservation and its challenges and opportunities are surveyed by A. Miller and Molly Taylor-Poleskey, who also offer suggestions for libraries as they develop or expand their preservation policies. In the editors' own chapter for this section, they chronicle the inherent difficulties of coordinating with other campus units to develop a sustainable model for continued DH work not beholden to soft money from granting entities.

Indeed, what stands out most in *Transformative Digital Humanities* are the presence of the library and the primacy of the global. And although the focus of this review is the place and role of libraries in this volume, the editors' obvious commitment to enriching the conversation with voices from beyond an especially US-centric domain of scholarship meant the inclusion of some unexpected and excellent chapters, including one from Race MoChridhe on understanding the potential of DH's capacity for reparative reading and post-criticality (in his case, using Scottish corpora). To be sure, given one of the editors is a librarian, it is perhaps less surprising that DH's transformations in this book pivot around libraries and librarians.

And this may explain why the library-oriented case studies in the aggregate could be viewed as "quiet transformations." More than being used here for a bad joke or terrible pun, that "quiet" also speaks (or maybe whispers?) to the often invisible or unacknowledged labor of librarians in creating and sustaining DH work. Libraries provide services, resources, infrastructural and domain

expertise support, even opportunities for students to develop and burnish their experience in DH. And therein resides one of *Transformative Digital Humanities*'s deficiencies: the absence of libraries or librarians as scholarly producers of DH. That absence, however, is less an editorial oversight and arguably more an indication of how both professors and librarians understand their roles in digital humanities work. But ultimately, this volume furnishes a useful snapshot of DH scholarship and support initiatives at the start of the 2020s, as well as, eventually, a helpful aperture into the past for future scholars looking to track change and continuity in an expanding field where change is seemingly continuous.

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