*Global Debates in the Digital Humanities*

# Can the Subaltern 'Do' DH?
# A Reflection on the Challenges and Opportunities for the Digital Humanities[*]

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For most of my PhD and the first years after I graduated, I explored how blogging fits within different models of academic knowledge production and research cycles. I did this through active participation in both formal and informal academic online networks, via blogging, microblogging, workshops and lectures. One of my main motivations to use the open Web and tap into existing networks of scholars interested in sharing information online was the need to reach out internationally. As an "international student" in the U.K., my perspective and positioning as a scholar was defined to a significant degree by socioeconomic context and background awareness, as well as by an understanding of the importance of locating, participating in, and contributing to developing international and multilingual connections and relationships. Scholarship, in my experience, was greatly hindered by what I perceived as a cumbersome, conservative, exclusionary communication culture which, indeed, privileged those already privileged. Reaching out online and offline was therefore, to me, a key component of the research lifecycle.

One of the highlights of my career was giving a lecture in 2011 at UNAM's National Library and Library Science Research Institute on the role I thought blogging and Open Access could play in the Humanities (Priego 2011). For me, blogging and open digital scholarship could not be separated from the digital humanities (DH). A digital humanities that disseminated its research outputs through the same traditional methods as other "non-digital" fields seemed to me a contradiction. I can now articulate, hopefully better than at the time, that at the core of my perspective was an understanding of scholarly communications as

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a key component of the research workflow and therefore of scholarship. The "digital" in digital humanities could not be disconnected from the methods and infrastructures by which such scholarship was produced and disseminated, and this included thinking of those who were being left outside those mechanisms. In that lecture, I used examples from music and popular culture as guiding examples, I discussed the importance of innovation and the positive power of disruptive change, explored blogging initiatives I personally admire and engage in, and suggested good practices and paths for future action.

Meeting at the lecture with colleagues and students from my home university was a very fruitful and thought-provoking experience. They were eager to learn and debate the ways in which blogging could be adopted as a means to increase teaching and research outputs and, perhaps more importantly, to increase the international visibility of the academic work that was already being done. There was a special interest in discussing ways in which intellectual property can be protected and shared online, and in the technical requirements of setting up an academic blog with its own domain.

One of the ideas I took with me was how important it is to realize the significant infrastructural differences between academic institutions around the world. This means going beyond the usual commonsense educated awareness that not all countries, and therefore not all academic institutions. enjoy (or suffer) the same structural conditions--funding, human resources, access to technology, salaries, academic work and "impact" cultures.

At the time, I reflected that this awareness meant understanding that in a globalized higher education market, some simple measures involving digital literacy strategies could be, for the time being, an initial step towards preventing a normalization that often leaves many scholars out of the competition. Indeed it was no secret at the time that "the promise of the digital humanities" was being pushed upwards and forward to the academic mainstream in the form of significant funding granted to projects involving digital technologies for teaching and research in the humanities, like that provided by the Office of Digital Humanities of the National Endowment for the Humanities (http://www.neh.gov/odh/) in the United States or JISC (http://www.jisc.ac.uk/) in the United Kingdom.

In the specific case of Mexico, though the National University and the National Council for Science and Technology (ttp://www.conacyt.mx/) fund projects that would fit within the digital humanities category, the sums granted and the global impact of the initiatives pale in comparison, not least because of very different cultural and disciplinary attitudes to the perceived relationships between computer technologies and the humanities.

The feedback I received from the lecture audience was that following best practices (including reliable multilingual metadata) for personal academic blogging holds a lot of potential for educational environments where it is harder to achieve quick and significant institutional change. Projects such as the Biblioteca de Pensamiento Novohispano (http://www.bdpn.unam.mx/), Estrategias de Lectura (http://elea.unam.mx/), and Reflexiones marginales (http://v2.reflexionesmarginales.com/) had recently received funding to continue their work of digital scholarship, and the Mexican Digital Humanities Network blog (Red de Humanistas Digitales: http://humanidadesdigitales.net/blog/) was gradually increasing its output. It has continued to play a role in forming a new generation of digital scholars.

It seemed to me at the time that "the promise of the digital humanities" was not only where the big money was; I suggested it was also where innovation using readily-available and inexpensive technologies was at work. I suppose I still want to believe this, though my post-PhD experience has taught me how difficult it is to disrupt traditional scholarly practices in a positive way, particularly without performing those tasks traditionally. The recognition of digital scholarship in the form of institutional funding is an essential step in advancing the digital humanities, but we should also be aware of the increasing digital divide between institutions and scholars. I continue to believe that international collaboration with a focus on open access, interoperability, affordable technologies and sustainability might be one of the essential steps towards the fulfilment of that promise.

## Subaltern DH

A promise implies a horizon, and many things can happen when walking towards it. Those of us who experienced the first iterations of access to the Web know well how much idealism there was in our imaginings of a more democratic playing field for the construction of knowledge. Fundamentally, machines have not necessarily allowed us more time to think, or to perform more 'human' tasks. The last ten years or so have been, to a great extent, a decade of identity politics and representation across cultural domains, including academia and therefore the digital humanities. The use of open or freely available technologies to produce and disseminate information online has not necessarily levelled the playing field, at least not in the ways some of us had imagined. To properly engage with academic debates online, one needs time and the right setting to sit down, go through the discussions, and reply as one would like to. This means replying thoroughly, thoughtfully, including correct references and hyperlinks, engaging respectfully with the different points of view, remembering people's

names, etc. Sadly, this indeed became increasingly difficult to do. (I miss my student days!) The ability to do this is in itself a kind of privilege.

A key moment in the genealogy of my thinking around the digital as means of production was when I published a post on U of Venus/Inside Higher Education (Priego 2010) inspired by Spivak's *Death of a Discipline* (2003), which is on comparative literature, but I thought at the time that it could also be 'used' to engage in debates around the theory and practice of the Digital Humanities. My post asked if the "subaltern could tweet." I used "tweet" metonymically, suggesting wider practices of online production and dissemination of information and knowledge. My intention was to address the challenges that under-represented voices often have to face, and well-represented voices in online and academic discourse do not.

In my thinking at the time, developing resources and communities for the humanities of today had resemblances to organizing a party. If you host it but don't tell anyone, no one will come. If you are a rude host, people will leave early. If the party is boring, they might not come again to the next one you organize. If the venue is in a remote location very hard to get to, people might be late or get lost on the way (in case they were not given an address, directions or a map). Those with special mobility needs might not come if you don't host your party in an accessible venue. If you charge money at the door, only those who can pay will come (if the party is good, some will gatecrash it). Some will use any money they have to get a place, because the investment is thought to be worth it, a step towards potential upward mobility in a highly hierarchical scene.

How does all this relate to using openly or freely available tools to produce and disseminate scholarship? It might sound simplistic, but in my experience it is in this sense that when we talk online resources, in digital humanities or any other discipline, your resource won't be used just because it's there. One needs to build the thing and also build the community (increasingly, "the thing" and "the community" are one and the same) (Warwick et al 2006: Procter et al 2010). Moreover, often "the thing" will need to address/predict what a given community might need to become meaningful. Sometimes you do a lot of hard work promoting a party, but the community is in no mood for it. In scholarly terms, there may be all this body of work out there as blog posts and other commentary pieces published online, but are they being recognized through citations? Are they being rewarded as valuable scholarly activity? Or is blogging, as a liminal practice not necessarily peer-reviewed nor

indexed within the traditional infrastructures, destined to be an exercise for the well to-do, who can afford the time to reflect publicly, and publish work that goes unrewarded?

But let's say it again: they will not come *just because* you have built it (Koh and Risam). Perhaps some will come if you are famous enough (but even celebrities have someone who carefully curates their guest lists). It will not be fully built until they come and inhabit it. Even though I am, like everyone else, tired of the definitional debate, I have to say I like this metaphor of "building" when speaking of digital humanities. I echo what others have said (apologies if I don't name you personally and link to you directly here) when I say that I believe there is a difference between the need to interrogate the discourse of/around/in/on/inside/outside digital humanities and technology in general, and the need to do something with those technologies for research. These alternatives are indeed not mutually exclusive, but there can come the point when they need to be distinct activities.

A simile might be useful. Often, the academic critique of, say, colonialist representations of "the Other" and the act of creating colonial representations of "the Other" are clearly distinct. The first is performed by the cultural scholar, the latter by the film maker, photographer, or advertising agency. It is possible to create representations that are critical of those colonialist representations, that address in practice the need to interrogate colonialist representations and, in so doing, offer an example of how to do it differently/ethically/better. I suppose the same happens with DH: we can spend the rest of our days (hopefully with funding obtained for the purpose) critiquing discourse or practices, calling for the need to do/engage with/ digital technologies differently.

This activity, it seems to me, requires a different kind of investment from working directly with those technologies, no matter how imperfectly. This is indeed a dilemma, because many of us are very much aware of the discourses built into the technologies/systems/structures/superstructures, but at the same time we face the danger of then not engaging with them at all. If we take the critique to its logical end, we wouldn't even dare to invest our time blogging, tweeting and commenting on online discussions using those same specific technologies that require such a long set of often-uninterrogated assumptions. It might be that the critique of digital humanities came too early on, before we had even begun to understand what it could be. As I experienced nearly a decade ago, the much-needed postcolonial critique of digital humanities is in fact not different from the critique we all need to make of the whole academic enterprise. This also means realizing that sometimes these debates reflect an anglocentrism which can be alienating for those of us outside the everyday

practicalities of the higher education system of the so-called Global North (Priego and Fiormonte 2016; Fiormonte 2019).

Deep down, I perceive a general dissatisfaction with the (to many of us painfully obvious) lack of equal opportunity in academia in general and perhaps even more in the digital humanities, given that in most cases, significant funding and infrastructural support is needed to get a project or center up from the ground. From a non-USAmerican perspective, it seems that suddenly 'DH' became this trendy panacea, making some people feel included and many others excluded. Those excluded are not happy. Once again, this is not specific to the field.

Where do we go from here? I believe there is room from all the different approaches. The fact some people are busy doing text encoding does not mean they are not sensitive to the "discursive formations" that govern most code. And if we spend all our time interrogating these discursive formations, maybe we won't be coding, or doing whatever is required to have "the thing" up and running, making things happen--including some of the interrogations that have to be momentarily suspended just *to do* "the thing.". A related question is whether it is not necessary to be able to do something before being able to interrogate it: can a cultural critique of code be performed as a "reader" only? Open question. Some suggest that true advancement can be achieved by blending both (see Terras 2013, for example). This does not mean I am making a bipolar opposition between interrogating and doing. It means I must accommodate both in their difference if we want to take things forward.

Blogging is at its best when it fosters respectful discussion, exchange of knowledge and, often, offline changes in practice. Debates around Othering practices in the digital humanities, like the ones that took place in 2013, remain paradigmatic examples of the need for "liminal" scholarly spaces where such discussion can take place. Can digital humanities be considered a historical refuge from race/class/gender/sexuality/disability? (Koh and Risam 2013). My personal, very simple, very direct answer to the question is: of course not. On the contrary, it might be one of the places where those categories are most openly acted out. "Of course not," I said, but this answer was only possible because the question had been asked, and because I had been able to access the question and to participate in the debate. To me that process demonstrates that accessible (read, in this case: open, dynamic, disseminated) scholarly discussion does foster significant change, even if later it runs the risk of being subsumed again into the mainstream.

As someone who has been at the receiving end of many "Othering" exclusionary practices, I consider myself particularly sensitive to discrimination and exclusion. And yet I believe that digital humanities can offer that space which is not a space of exemption (on the contrary, it is a paradigmatic space). It is because of this that it can offer an open window (I am not sure it could fairly be considered a door) to what exists now and could be done better, more openly and more accessibly. But in order to do this, we first need to host the party. If we spend our lives discussing whether we should plan it, or what "hosting" and "party" mean, well, we will just go mad (and have no party).

A key issue, then, is how to do a different type of scholarship, one where the cart is not put before the horse; or, perhaps, where the horse and the cart are one and the same. Digital humanities has continued doing things most traditionally, in spite of its engagement with innovative methods of enquiry. Digital humanists have continued to publish in traditional paywalled journals, have continued to do peer review as in other fields, using the same systems as other fields, expecting (largely) the same ability from everyone to attend the same events, year after year. There is data to back this up, but its retrieval and discussion belong to a different type of output.

The type of knowledge that can be constructed through online debate, including blogging and social media, workshops and hackathons/editathons, is a type of knowledge that largely continues unrewarded and, importantly, mostly uncited in "the literature." In a way, we have been unable to fulfil the promise of the *digital* in digital humanities, not because the field and its practitioners have not engaged with digital methods of analysis and design and building of digital resources, but because our means of scholarly communication is still largely dominated by traditional, closed, exclusionary methods that privilege the already privileged. It is a kind of aspirational scholarship for those in the periphery or the Global South (Fiormonte 2017; Priego and Fiormonte 2018). We have attempted to do the walk, not just the talk. An evidence of this is how our scholarly outputs have privileged the fostering of by now long-lasting and ongoing conversations with colleagues and audiences near and far (Fiormonte, Priego, Pimenta and Del Rio Riande).

I write this as someone who doesn't *really* "do DH," not like some colleagues I respect and admire. In my case, it has been by leading and coordinating the creation of communities and collaborative online projects that I have realized how difficult and complex it can be. If coordinating a team of scholars to promote an open-access media-specific journal (https://www.comicsgrid.com/) for an emerging arts and humanities trans-discipline is doing

digital humanities, then *maybe* I do it; but seriously, I don't think determining that is the point (see for example Del Rio Riande). All I know is that we had a choice between working to create something that didn't exist before in the same way, and not doing it. All projects are perfectible, and flaws are discovered and created along the way. Productive theoretical interrogation can take place, and often does take place, alongside practice, and as such we contribute to the building and rebuilding of what we still call "the digital humanities".

*Author's note*

By request of the editors, this article is based on two previously published blog posts, "Globalisation of Digital Humanities: An Uneven Promise" (University of Venus Blog, *Inside Higher Ed*, January 26, 2012), and "Where Do We Go from Here? A Comment on "Building" in the Digital Humanities" (HASTAC, October 3, 2013).

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