

INTERSECTIONALITY IN DIGITAL HUMANITIES



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INTERSECTIONALITY IN DIGITAL HUMANITIES

edited by
**BARBARA BORDALEJO and
ROOPIKA RISAM**

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We dedicate this volume to Tessa Bordalejo Robinson, who is already fighting to dismantle the heteronormative patriarchy.



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CONTENTS

List of Illustrations	vii
Acknowledgements	ix
Introduction	
BARBARA BORDALEJO and ROOPIKA RISAM	i
1 All the Digital Humanists Are White, All the Nerds Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave MOYA Z. BAILEY	9
2 Beyond the Margins: Intersectionality and Digital Humanities ROOPIKA RISAM	13
3 <i>You Build the Roads, We Are the Intersections</i>	35
ADAM VÁZQUEZ	
4 Digital Humanities, Intersectionality, and the Ethics of Harm DOROTHY KIM	45
5 Walking Alone Online: Intersectional Violence on the Internet BARBARA BORDALEJO	59
6 Ready Player Two: Inclusion and Positivity as a Means of Furthering Equality in Digital Humanities and Computer Science KYLE DASE	73
7 Gender, Feminism, Textual Scholarship, and Digital Humanities PETER ROBINSON	89
8 Faulty, Clumsy, Negligible? Revaluating Early Modern Princesses' Letters as a Source for Cultural History and Corpus Linguistics VERA FASSHAUER	109

9 Intersectionality in Digital Archives: The Case Study of the Barbados
Synagogue Restoration Project Collection
AMALIA S. LEVI 127

10 Accessioning Digital Content and the Unwitting Move toward
Intersectionality in the Archive
KIMBERLEY HARSLEY 149

11 All along the Watchtower: Intersectional Diversity as a Core Intellectual
Value in Digital Humanities
DANIEL PAUL O'DONNELL 167

Appendix: Writing about Internal Deliberations
DANIEL PAUL O'DONNELL 185

Select Bibliography..... 187

Index..... 189

ILLUSTRATIONS

Figures

Figure 1.	Gender ratio at digital humanities conferences, 2010–2103.	90
Figure 2.	Proportion of men and women editors for the series surveyed, 1860–2016.....	92
Figure 3.	Proportions of men and women editors by decade.....	93
Figure 4.	Relative proportions of men and women editors by decade.....	93
Figure 5.	Comparison of relative proportions of men and women editors by decade.....	94
Figure 6a.	Names of editors in the Oxford editions series, and others.....	95
Figure 6b.	Names of recipients of the MLA seal, and others.	96
Figure 7.	An American editor: Fredson Bowers.....	97
Figure 8.	An EETS edition not edited by a woman.	100
Figure 9.	Board members of the Society for Textual Scholarship, June 2017.....	104
Figure 10.	Annotation levels in the score editor.....	119
Figure 11.	Consonant duplication in Sibylla’s page margin.	124

Table

Table 1.	Graphic realization of <ai> in Sibylla.	123
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INTRODUCTION

Barbara Bordalejo and Roopika Risam

WHILE A RELATIVELY new dimension of scholarly conversation in digital humanities, intersectionality is an intervention in feminist and anti-racist discourse with a much longer history. The origins of scholarship on what has come to be known as intersectionality can be traced to the work of critical race scholar and legal theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw. In the course of her examination of case law in the 1980s, she identified the limitations of legal discourse that focused on single-axis analysis—gender or race—and its consequences for not only anti-discrimination law but also feminist and anti-racist theory and praxis. Through her work with women at domestic abuse shelters in California, Crenshaw identified a further disturbing trend: black and brown women seemed to be disproportionately affected by domestic violence in relation to their white women counterparts.¹ Tracing the root causes of these phenomena, Crenshaw argued that black and brown women had been failed by both feminist movements and anti-racist activists. White feminism had presumed that remedying gender inequalities would, in turn, improve the lives of women whose experiences were also affected by racial and other forms of inequality. Meanwhile, black men put race at the forefront of anti-racist organizing, assuming that the effects of remedying racial inequality would trickle down to black women. What both groups failed to realize, however, was that totalizing approaches that focused on single axes of oppression were ill-equipped to address the needs of those at the convergence of race and gender. Their experiences at the confluences of these categories proved that the operations of identity derive from the tangled interplay of factors which form the crux of oppression and require an equally complex response. Since Crenshaw's original thesis, intersectionality has gained a foothold within feminist thought. For the purposes of this volume and within the context of digital humanities research, we draw on Crenshaw's definition of intersectionality and expand it to include not only race and gender but also other axes of identity, including class, sexuality, and nation, as well as the digital divides emerging from disparities in technological access and inequalities that shape the relationships between particular communities and technologies.

Intersectionality occupies central place in digital humanities discourse, with a number of recent interventions calling attention to its value. Moya Bailey's essay, "All the Digital Humanists Are White, All the Nerds Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave," reprinted in this volume, is arguably the first digital humanities essay to invoke the significance of intersectional feminist thought. In the essay, Bailey points out that intersectional digital humanities work has a longer history that gets elided in typical narratives of digital humanities. She further articulates its crucial potential for digital humanities

¹ Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43 (1991): 1241–99, 1242.

scholarship: “There is still a need to challenge the ‘add and stir’ model of diversity, a practice of sprinkling in more women, people of colour, disabled folks and assuming that is enough to change current paradigms.”² Building on Bailey’s work, Roopika Risam’s article, “Beyond the Margins: Intersectionality in Digital Humanities,” which originally appeared in *Digital Humanities Quarterly* in 2015 and is also republished in this volume, sought to articulate a vision for an intersectional digital humanities. She argues that intersectionality intervenes in the fictional dichotomy between “hack” and “yack” within digital humanities discourses, bridging theory and praxis through cultural critique.

Further interventions, such as Elizabeth Losh, Jacqueline Wernimont, Laura Wexler, and Hong-An Wu’s “Putting the Human Back into the Digital Humanities: Feminism, Generosity, and Mess” and Jacqueline Wernimont and Elizabeth Losh’s “Problems with White Feminism: Intersectionality and Digital Humanities,” have explored the value of intersectionality for digital humanities scholarship.³ Wernimont and Losh have also edited the volume *Bodies of Information: Intersectional Feminism and Digital Humanities* (2019), for the Debates in the Digital Humanities series, bringing intersectionality into the mainstream of digital humanities scholarship.⁴ This volume intervenes in this emerging scholarly conversation with essays that engage directly with intersectionality as a concept for digital humanities practices.

Over the last decade, we have seen the salutary embrace of this “add and stir” model of diversity in digital humanities—an interest within digital humanities communities in increasing racial and ethnic representation on boards, linguistic nods to the importance of diversity in codes of conduct, attention to the significance of multilingualism, and the inclusion of digital humanities practitioners around the world in conferences and in conversation. What we have seen less of, however, is the openness to the transformation of practices that the inclusion of practitioners from a broader range of scholarly backgrounds, particularly in African diaspora, feminist, ethnic, and postcolonial thought, might bring. The seat at the “already established table” that Bailey warns about is a model that is still largely understood to be the mechanism through which diversity operates within digital humanities communities. The result of this has been a burden of representation placed on those who provide visible diversity—whether through their own identities or through the scholarship they create. In turn, this puts these practitioners in

2 Moya Z. Bailey, “All the Digital Humanists Are White, All the Nerds Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave,” *Journal of Digital Humanities* 1, no. 1 (2011), <http://journalofdigitalhumanities.org/1-1/all-the-digital-humanists-are-white-all-the-nerds-are-men-but-some-of-us-are-brave-by-moya-z-bailey/>.

3 Elizabeth Losh, Jacqueline Wernimont, Laura Wexler, and Hong-An Wu, “Putting the Human Back into the Digital Humanities: Feminism, Generosity, and Mess,” in *Debates in the Digital Humanities*, ed. Matthew K. Gold and Lauren F. Klein (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 92–103; Jacqueline Wernimont and Elizabeth Losh, “Problems with White Feminism: Intersectionality and Digital Humanities,” in *Doing Digital Humanities*, ed. Constance Crompton, Richard J. Lane, and Ray Siemens (London: Routledge, 2016), 35–47.

4 Elizabeth Losh and Jacqueline Wernimont, eds., *Bodies of Information: Intersectional Feminism and Digital Humanities* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019).

the position of representing unheard voices within digital humanities communities in an environment that is not open to the inevitable transformation of scholarly practices that an intersectional approach to digital humanities provides.⁵

There are two presumptions that have permeated digital humanities and call its scholarly integrity into question because they have failed to account for intersectionality. The first one, which is not exclusive to digital humanities, is that technologies are neutral and free of biases. As a result, digital humanities projects, tools, and methods have been largely developed without attention to the operations of race, gender, class, sexuality, ability, nation, and other axes of oppression, despite the fact that these circulate throughout the texts with which this scholarship engages. The second is an assumption that has emerged in the history of digital humanities: that a “big tent” approach is sufficient to address these concerns because digital humanities is “nice.”⁶

The assumption that technologies are not biased has been shown to be incorrect, and yet it continues in scholarship, from sciences to social sciences to digital humanities.⁷ These biases are often hidden, deeply embedded within the methods subtending scholarly practices, encoded by human actors who have failed to explore how their own biases are translating to the technologies they are designing. Often, the creators assume that they are unbiased or that their biases are irrelevant in scientific and technological contexts. For example, when Hewlett-Packard (HP) released its motion-tracking webcam, users promptly noticed that the cameras did not work with people with dark skin.⁸ This was widely discussed in mainstream media, and HP vowed to look into the issue.⁹ It would be simplistic to assume, as people might have, that the HP developers were racist. Rather, they failed to recognize the effects their biases would have on the technology they were developing. Moreover, in an environment where their colleagues were most likely to be white and Asian men, due to underrepresentation of African Americans in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields, they were likely to have tested the tracking device with themselves and their co-workers, without recognizing that they were missing an important segment of the population in the United States.¹⁰

⁵ Roopika Risam, “Diversity Work and Digital Carework in Higher Education,” *First Monday* 23, no. 5 (2018), <https://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/8241/6651>.

⁶ Tom Scheinfeldt, “Why Digital Humanities Is ‘Nice,’” in *Debates in Digital Humanities*, ed. Matthew K. Gold (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), <http://dhdebates.gc.cuny.edu/debates/text/36>.

⁷ Sara Wachter-Boettcher, *Technically Wrong: Sexist Apps, Biased Algorithms, and Other Threats of Toxic Tech* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2017).

⁸ wzamen01, *HP Computers Are Racist*, accessed September 1, 2018, www.youtube.com/watch?v=t4DT3tQqgRM. Published on YouTube 2009.

⁹ Mallory Simon, “HP Looking into Claim Webcams Can’t See Black People,” CNN, accessed December 23, 2009, www.cnn.com/2009/TECH/12/22/hp.webcams/index.html; Adam Rose, “Face-Detection Cameras: Glitches Spur Charges of Racism,” *Time*, January 22, 2010, <http://content.time.com/time/business/article/0,8599,1954643,00.html>.

¹⁰ Jeff Desjardins, “INFOGRAPHIC: Silicon Valley’s Diversity by the Numbers,” *Business Insider*, August 15, 2017, www.businessinsider.com/infographic-tech-diversity-companies-compared-2017-8.

Within digital humanities, similar examples abound, along with important responses grounded in intersectional thought. The Textual Encoding Initiative (TEI), which designs standards for representing texts in digital form, has had to negotiate its own biases, as changes for a “sex value” attribute were proposed and implemented.¹¹ Originally, the TEI guidelines suggested the attributes of 1 for “male,” 2 for “female,” 9 for “non-applicable,” and 0 for “unknown.” At the time, it was remarked that the assignment of 2 for women made it appear as if women were secondary to men. This intervention also did not address the way the TEI guidelines perpetuate a binary view of gender, which fails to account for the broad range of gender categories beyond a “male” and “female” sex value. Several projects, however, have recognized the importance of taking intersectionality into account in the schema used by digital humanists. For example, the Orlando Project has radically revised its coding schema, while the Project on the History of Black Writing is designing new approaches to metadata that improve discovery of African American writing.¹²

Why, however, has it taken so long for digital humanists to begin embracing such approaches? Digital humanities has been limited by its own perception of being a “big tent” and “nice” community. Certainly, a “big tent” metaphor connotes the welcoming, open quality that Tom Scheinfeldt ascribes to digital humanities: “Our most commonly used bywords are ‘collegiality,’ ‘openness,’ and ‘collaboration.’ We welcome new practitioners easily, and we don’t seem to get in lots of fights.”¹³ Yet, simply claiming to be welcoming, open, and collegial does not necessarily translate into a community that is hospitable to or safe for those whose identities and whose scholarly subject matter are underrepresented within it. As numerous debates over “diversity” within digital humanities indicate, the interventions of these scholars and their work has an unfortunate history of being met with reluctance and dismissiveness. As a result, the weight of intersecting systems of oppression forestalls the inclusion of scholarly interventions which might transform existing practices of digital humanities. Indeed, the tokenization of women and minorities has taken a toll and has caused individuals to withdraw from the digital humanities community as they try to salvage their work and their well-being.

Despite this challenging environment where equity and justice struggle to thrive, this collection builds on signs of hope within digital humanities. In September 2016, Barbara Bordalejo organized the first conference on intersectional feminist thought and digital humanities at KU Leuven in Belgium. This international conference, “Intersectionality in Digital Humanities,” brought together speakers from around the world, including Alex Gil, Daniel O’Donnell, Padmini Ray Murray, Roopika Risam, Melissa Terras, and Deb Verhoeven for workshops and talks examining feminist approaches to digital humanities at the interstices of race, caste, gender, class, sexuality, and other axes of

11 Melissa Terras, Gabriel Bodard, Elena Pierazzo, Sebastian Rahtz, Martin Holmes, and James Cummings, “Text Encoding Initiative / Feature Requests / #425 TEI Using Outmoded ISO 5218 for Sex Value Attribute,” January 21, 2013, <https://sourceforge.net/p/tei/feature-requests/425/>.

12 The Orlando Project, accessed April 7, 2019, www.artsrn.ualberta.ca/orlando/; Project on the History of Black Writing, accessed April 7, 2019, <https://hbw.ku.edu/>.

13 Scheinfeldt, “Why Digital Humanities Is ‘Nice,’” 59.

oppression. Bordalejo's foundational event marked an important milestone in the development of discourses around diversity, equity, and social justice in digital humanities. This volume emerges from the conference, including essays by speakers alongside new voices exploring the theory and practices of digital humanities informed by intersectional feminism.

This volume, therefore, responds to several challenges: the add and stir model of diversity, the hidden histories of intersectionality within digital humanities, and the emerging community of scholars putting intersectionality at the forefront of digital research methods in the humanities. We seek to shed light on the difficult conversations about equity, justice, and the influence of intersectionality on digital humanities practices. Topics under consideration range from the challenges faced by scholars within digital humanities because of their identity categories and their work, the structural barriers within digital humanities professional communities, and the value of integrating intersectional feminist methods into digital humanities scholarship. Addressing these issues may produce discomfort for readers, but doing so is necessary to creating environments where scholarship can thrive.

We begin with essays that set the theoretical stage for the rest of the volume, reflecting on the transformation of scholarly practices made possible through intersectional feminist frameworks. Moya Bailey's essay, previously published in the *Journal of Digital Humanities* in 2011, was the first essay within digital humanities scholarship to address intersectionality. She speaks to the bravery that scholars whose experiences are inflected by race, gender, class, sexuality, and ability demonstrate in a scholarly context that is unwelcoming at best and hostile at worst. Bailey argues that an approach to digital humanities that simply allows these scholars a seat at the table fails to account for the ways that their scholarship transforms the practices of digital humanities.

Addressing hidden undercurrents of intersectionality within digital humanities, Roopika Risam's essay, previously published in *Digital Humanities Quarterly*, considers how debates over "hack vs. yack" fail to account for the intimate connection between theory and praxis in digital humanities scholarship. Intending to open the black box of digital humanities projects, Risam argues that a number of digital humanities projects provide critical examples of integrating intersectional feminist approaches, despite the fact that they have not been named as such. She contends that continued work at the interface of theory and praxis through intersectional lenses is integral to intervening in the false dichotomy between digital humanities and cultural criticism, which is necessary to realizing the promise of exploration and innovation that digital humanities scholarship holds.

Adam Vázquez focuses on another challenge to increased equity and justice within digital humanities: misunderstanding of the term intersectionality by privileged individuals. He examines three aspects of digital humanities: the criteria by which the committee members of the major digital humanities organizations are appointed; the factors which we judge as determinative of intersectionality, such as whether "ability" is a component of intersectionality; and the debate over "hack vs. yack" described by Risam. He casts his arguments through the metaphorical lens of roads: each "road" is an intersectional factor cutting through the world of digital humanities, and we are

positioned at the “intersection” of these roads. This model, he suggests, applies more broadly to intersectionality in digital humanities.

Building on Bailey and Risam’s early work and exemplifying the model posed by Vázquez, Dorothy Kim’s essay poses the important question of how intersectionality influences practices within digital humanities. Kim focuses on projects that have unethically collected large amounts of data on women of colour. She argues that the data collection has as a troubling consequence: the targeting of marginalized bodies for the purposes of surveillance and control. Without attention to such potentially dangerous effects, Kim suggests, digital humanities risks perpetuating an ethics of harm within media environments that are already treacherous for women of colour. In doing so, Kim calls for attention to the need for intersectional thought within digital humanities methods to avoid perpetuating this violence.

Further attending to connections between oppression in digital media and digital humanities, Barbara Bordalejo explores the development of the online culture of harassment that is pervasive today. She argues that this is a transference of “real” spaces in which women and minorities are regularly victims of persistent attacks. Bordalejo traces the methods used by neo-fascist, right-wing political movements to silence those who question the status quo online to the infamous Gamergate case and shows that the same harassment practices are being used against academics in an attempt to intimidate them into compliance. Bordalejo concludes that the academic community must take on the role of public intellectuals to condemn harassment and act as a compass in times when societal structures are changing, to mitigate institutional discrimination against traditionally marginalized groups. The practical engagement of scholars is central to the development of richer, more diverse environments where ideas can be exchanged without fear of falling victim of very real attacks.

Focusing on the role of gender in technological communities, Kyle Dase analyzes the role of women within digital humanities. Dase’s starting point is the speech “Has Anyone Seen a Woman?” delivered by Deb Verhoeven at the Digital Humanities 2015 conference in Sydney, Australia, which has become a foundational point of reference for discussions about equity and justice in digital humanities. Dase contends that while feminist critics offer an important perspective, their detractors ignore them and do not engage with the arguments. Instead, they devolve into personal attacks. Dase offers examples that have had a positive impact on women in computer science, arguing that these efforts are not proceeding at a sufficiently accelerated rate. Activism and engagement go hand in hand, Dase proposes, when it comes to reshaping the landscape of diversity in gaming, computer sciences, and digital humanities.

Still another issue is the question of representation within scholarly communities in digital humanities. Peter Robinson takes up this issue by analyzing the number of women editors in the Early English Text Society editions, the Oxford editions, and editions that have been granted the MLA seal of approval. He discovers that only a small percentage of editions (16 percent) have been produced by women. He also notes that the bias is not simply men over women: historically, scholarly editors have belonged to a narrow band of the white patriarchy, broadly identified by social class. Robinson develops an argument for what he calls feminist textual scholarship, which he equates with the bringing

forward of evidence from a non-dominant perspective. Feminist textual scholarship, according to Robinson, is characterized by an openness to multiple perspectives that is missing from most traditional editions by editors who are men. Robinson does not argue that this feminist approach to editing is necessarily exclusively done by women, but he acknowledges that women have the tendency to present a more fluid and equitable view of texts.

As the next three essays suggest, digital archives are important sites of exploration for intersectional approaches to digital humanities. Addressing the connections between gender and socioeconomic status, Vera Fasshauer presents a database of princesses' letters which allows for complex corpus linguistics queries. Her research demonstrates how linguistic formulae were used as markers of the social status of women, even when they were princesses. The use of language as a system of control becomes clear in Fasshauer's text, which exemplifies the many constraints to which princesses were subjected when addressing their lords. The database shows princesses were not, as it is often supposed, semi-literate or linguistically incompetent, and yet their linguistic register evinces a type of educational discrimination that had been hitherto hidden.

When written records do not exist, however, how can digital archives be built for marginalized populations? Amalia S. Levi takes up this issue, emphasizing the recovery of information from destitute or enslaved groups because they tend not to have left a written record behind, rendering them invisible within traditional archives. As a solution, Levi proposes a series of steps that can be followed to create genuinely intersectional archives which reflect what is lost or has been erased. For this, she uses the example of the Barbados Synagogue Restoration Project Collection, where the silences within the collection are as meaningful as the available data.

Further examining how power dynamics influence the creation of digital archives, Kimberley Harsley examines the intersectional aspects of the South Asian American Digital Archive, which she contrasts with three different projects: the Strathclyde University Archives and Special Collections, the Scottish Jewish Archives Centre, and the Glasgow Women's Library. Harsley suggests that the combination of digital media and an intersectional approach subverts the traditional archive by questioning the power structures that frequently permeate archival practices. Harsley's reminder that we can be both researchers and activists is fundamental to her argument.

This collection closes with an essay by Daniel Paul O'Donnell, who discusses a series of events concerning diversity related to the Digital Humanities 2016 Conference in Krakow, Poland, sponsored by the Alliance of Digital Humanities Organizations (ADHO). O'Donnell traces debates between the ADHO Steering Committee, the conference program committee, and representatives from constituent organizations over diversity at the conference, which came close to creating a schism within ADHO. O'Donnell questions the idea proposed by an ADHO leader that "diversity" and "quality" are mutually exclusive. Instead, he argues that it is diversity that leads to advances in digital humanities. O'Donnell concludes that diversity must be a core value of digital humanities since, without it, digital humanities will cease to be a paradiscipline and become a sub-discipline. In his view, diversity is not something digital humanities practitioners embrace because it is imposed upon us: it is actually a fundamental value of the digital

humanities. O'Donnell's essay concludes this collection with both words of warning and a vision of hope. It encapsulates the dialogue between our scholarly pasts and our possible scholarly futures that runs throughout all the articles in the volume. On one hand, the articles in this volume look back to the best of traditional scholarship, to where it has served us well. On the other hand, the articles invoke a vision of scholarship challenged by difference, in every sense, which can enrich our scholarship and ourselves.

While this volume addresses a range of interventions in intersectional approaches to digital humanities, we must note that it is not, nor does it intend to be, a comprehensive examination of the topic. We recognize, for example, that even though we have included essays that attend to the influence of nationality within digital humanities communities, the scholars in the collection are predominantly affiliated with institutions in the Global North. In part, this reflects the pressures on digital humanists working within the Global South, who receive many publication requests because of well-intentioned but often tokenizing desires for "representation." The fact that this volume does not aspire to provide "coverage" of intersectionality, however, is an important qualifier. What we offer here is not a final statement but a contribution to the emerging conversation.

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