

INTRODUCTION: Seizing the Methodological Moment: The Digital Humanities and Historiography in Rhetoric and Composition

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[T]he role of the humanist is critical at this historic moment, as our cultural legacy migrates to digital formats and our relation to knowledge, cultural material, technology and society is radically re-conceptualized. [. . . Digital humanities scholarship] is producing new modes of knowledge formation, reaching new audiences for digital scholarship, and setting new intellectual agendas and priorities for the twenty-first century.

—Todd Presner and Chris Johanson, “The Promise of Digital Humanities” (2)

For many scholars in rhetoric and composition, the clarion call of the digital humanities might not resound with the urgency expressed in our opening epigraph. From the earliest studies on computer-assisted writing instruction over thirty years ago to the founding of the journals *Computers and Composition* (1983) and *Kairos* (1996) to notable CCCC chair’s addresses by scholars such as Lester Faigley (1996), Cynthia Selfe (1998), and Kathleen Blake Yancey (2004), our field has been, in Selfe’s words, “paying attention” to how digital technologies reshape and invigorate our thinking about literacy, rhetorical practice, and composing writ large.¹ *Historians* in our field, however, have not in large part entered these conversations. Because much of our work centers on moments before the advent

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of the Internet and because, until quite recently, our research methodologies have focused on material artifacts in physical archives, many of us have perhaps concluded that we can leave questions of technology to our colleagues in digital literacy studies.

Recent innovations in the digital humanities have reframed conversations about the digital in ways that suggest there is much for historiographers in our field to pay attention to. New scholarship emerging out of the digital humanities works not only to see technology as a mode of literacy, as those in our field may understand it, but rather to *use* technology to develop digital tools and platforms that position scholars to do more robust as well as new kinds of interpretive and historiographic work. Much of this work, to the excitement of historians across the disciplines, begins with digital archivization.

Cathy Davidson explains that the first wave of humanities computing brought with it the onset of digital curation—a process that made archival materials widely available on the Web and “transformed how we do research and who can do it” (709). As large-scale digitization made possible archives such as the (Abraham) Lincoln Archives Digital Project, the (Jeremy) Bentham Project, the Walt Whitman Archive, and the (Emily) Dickinson Electronic Archives, the concern of scholars has begun to shift from obtaining and archiving materials to searching and negotiating these sources. This move has also prompted a widespread recognition among digital scholars that digitization brings with it a new kind of methodological problem: archival overabundance. Reflecting on their digital archivization work with the Women and Social Movements Project, historians Katherine Kish Sklar and Thomas Dublin note that although we now have access to a “sea of information,” we have relatively little guidance regarding how to “construct meaning within that sea.” The archive, as historian William Turkel asserts, is now “infinite” (qtd. in D. Cohen et al. 455), and we need a set of tools and a set of methodologies for negotiating it.

In response, digital scholars have invented tools to mine and make sense of this archival infinitude. Google’s Ngram Viewer, for example, can “read” millions of texts in just moments, offering, in digital scholar Matthew Kirschenbaum’s words, “powerful new methods for finding patterns across large text collections” (1). As Todd Presner explains, although these new data-mining technologies may “threaten to overwhelm traditional approaches to knowledge,” they do “[allow] us to ask questions that weren’t previously possible.” In addition to tools that mine archival data, digital humanists are also exploring other avenues to make sense of data. For example, scholars in classics and archeology are taking advantage of “digital tools such as Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and 3D modeling to advance their research in significant and unexpected ways” (6). Further, research database tools such as Zotero offer new forms of collaboration that allow scholars to network their research practices and results in ways that would have been almost impossible before.

These innovations have garnered the attention of humanists across the academy, but especially historians, and we might say that the digital humanities is breeding a new type of scholarship: digital historiography. As historian William Thomas explains in a roundtable conversation in the *Journal of American History*, digital historiography is a “methodological approach framed by the hypertextual power of [digital] technologies to make, define, query, and annotate associations in the human record of the past” (D. Cohen et al. 454).² For Michael Firsch, these innovations prompt a series of important questions that critically shape the way history is produced, such as “What do these emerging digital tools do to our sense of the work we are and can be doing? What do they do to our sense of history as a mode of interrogation/knowledge-creation/understanding?” (D. Cohen et al. 458). Given this engagement with the digital, it should come as no surprise that historian Tom Scheinfeldt believes that questions like these have initiated a new phase in historiographic scholarship; we are in a “methodological moment,” he argues, when the practice of history will change dramatically (qtd. in P. Cohen).

This methodological moment could come at no better time for historians of rhetoric and composition. Because scholars in our field are already so deeply invested in methodology (Buehl, Chute, and Fields; Gold; Glenn and Enoch, “Drama,” “Invigorating”; Kirsch and Rohan; Ramsey et al.; Royster and Kirsch), we are well poised to engage in and shape these conversations, and indeed, a small but growing number of historians are already doing so. Alexis Ramsey-Tobienne, for example, in a recent *Peitho* article, describes “Archives 2.0” as the emergent and “participatory” archival form that enables researchers to cull information from the archive, and to add both content and commentary, creating new methodological possibilities for researchers in the process.³ Jessica Enoch and Jean Bessette have put specific feminist methodologies in conversation with digital innovations, asking scholars to “consider not only how digital innovations may correspond with or enhance feminist historiographic priorities, but also how they might detract from or run counter to our goals and investments” (636). Taking a “renewed look” at what Susan Wells identifies as the “three gifts” of the material archive (resistance, freedom, and possibility), James Purdy contemplates how digital archives “challenge our assumptions about the pace and rigor, evidentiary options and scholarly potentials, and inclusive opportunities and disciplinary influence of archival work” (43). Adding to Wells’s list, Purdy offers three new “gifts” that emerge from these digital contexts: “integration, customization, and accessibility” (43).⁴

Though we greatly appreciate the work these scholars have done to consider our field’s relationship to digital historiography and to digital archives more particularly, we wish here to explore this methodological moment a bit differently. Certainly a critical part of engaging with emergent technologies is to analyze the archives that are already “out there,” those that we access and use. Our goal in this special issue

of *College English*, however, is to draw attention to a different kind of digital practice: the work of *building* digital historiographic projects ourselves. In the four essays that make up this issue, we highlight Ellen Cushman's work with the Cherokee community on a digital educational archive and curriculum, Jim Ridolfo's digitization of sacred Samaritan texts, Shannon Carter and Kelly Dent's multimodal historiographic production *Remixing Rural Texas*, and Tarez Samra Graban's feminist Metadata Mapping Project. Like many of our colleagues in digital literacy studies, these contributors have become what Tara McPherson calls "multimodal scholars," scholars who "brin[g] together databases, scholarly tools, networked writing, and peer-to-peer commentary while also leveraging the potential of visual and aural media that so dominate contemporary life" (120). In other words, the contributors here do not just analyze digital technologies, they produce them. Our most basic and primary objective in this special issue is to feature the work of these multimodal historiographers and invite them to present their digital projects to the rhetoric and composition community. But of course their work (and ours) goes beyond mere presentation. We thus outline three major strands of common interest and significance these contributions share.

First, what we find particularly compelling about our contributors' digital projects is that they directly address the values and concerns that lie at the heart of critical practice in rhetoric and composition. It is perhaps not surprising that all of the scholars in this issue are creating digital historiographic projects that engage underrepresented or marginalized communities: contemporary Cherokee language learners, members of the Samaritan religious group and their "textual diaspora," African American activists in rural Texas in the 1960s, and women compositionists in the Midwest. Cushman, Ridolfo, Carter and Dent, and Graban all consider how their digital historiographic projects enable (or disable) them to continue the work of addressing the rhetorical significance of populations often silenced by dominant historical narratives. Thus, the essays in this special issue are dedicated to exploring the extent to which new digital tools and environments allow scholars to further the disciplinary project set out by figures such as Cheryl Glenn (*Rhetoric Retold, Unspoken*), Malea Powell ("Down by the River," "Rhetorics of Survivance"), Jacqueline Jones Royster, and Xiaoye You.

Second, the scholarly contributions here move beyond the initial historiographic act of "rescue, recovery, and (re)inscription" (Royster and Kirsch 31). That is, our contributors work not just to identify moments when historical actors were speaking and then present these moments digitally. Rather, they each take up questions regarding historiographic investigation, argument, delivery, and, perhaps most importantly, ethics, considering questions such as these: How do we create digital scholarship in ways that engage with historical actors and present-day stakeholder communities on their own terms? How do we respect issues of language and culture

through our digital projects? How do we acknowledge and work against dominant historiographic processes that have erased marginalized communities? How do we effectively engage with the local? How do we respectfully include the voices of citizen stakeholders in our practice? And how do we deliver historiographic projects in ways that stakeholder communities outside of our field will find useful?

Third, we want to emphasize a practice that might go unnoticed in these four essays: collaboration. Although Carter and Dent's essay is the only one that announces its collaboratively authored nature, we find it crucial to note that each of the projects in this special issue is grounded in and bolstered by collaborative work. There is collaboration among and extensive conversation with scholars inside and outside rhetoric and composition, stakeholder groups, and digital experts. We want to highlight the significant part collaboration plays in these projects, and we want to encourage these and other scholars to continue to discuss the nature of their collaborations. We are confident that as scholars become more involved in complex digital historiography projects, collaboration will become increasingly important.

This special issue opens with an essay that both suggests the promise of the digital humanities for historiographic scholarship and cautions us against the naïve enthusiasm that sometimes animates such work. In "Wampum, Sequoyan, and Story: Decolonizing the Digital Archive," Cushman calls attention to the need for scholars "to understand the troubled and troubling roots of archives," both material and digital, "if [scholars are] to understand the instrumental, historical, and cultural significance of the pieces therein" (116). Cushman demonstrates that when engaging with stakeholder communities, there is no one-size-fits-all approach. Drawing on empirical and ethnohistorical research on Cherokee language and writing, Cushman describes her collaborative efforts with the Cherokee Nation to build a digital curriculum that serves as both an archive of Cherokee knowledge and a means of cultural transmission, thus becoming a vehicle for teaching its citizens Cherokee language and literacy, as well as history, storytelling practices, and epistemology.

Cushman's digital project is of particular significance to Cherokee stakeholders, because a low percentage of Cherokees are fluent in either the spoken language or its written form, Sequoyan. Moreover, the project represents a means of claiming what Scott Lyons has defined as "rhetorical sovereignty" in that it makes "accessible the stories and practices of storytelling in ways that honor indigenous enunciations of knowledge and help learners persevere in their culture and language" (132). Such work, Cushman contends, counters colonialist archival traditions that decontextualize and render static "native" traditions by separating "artifacts" from their place, people, and use. Cushman further argues that this kind of decolonizing work must happen "on the people's terms"—that is, the community must be in charge of creating and

maintaining the materials (132). Thus, while the decision of the Cherokee Nation to restrict public access to the curriculum might trouble scholars in digital humanities and rhetoric and composition, where open access has long been celebrated and the needs of researchers have sometimes trumped those of stakeholders, we must respect these wishes. “Anything less,” Cushman writes, “is to impose, yet again, a Western epistemological understanding onto their practices, even if this perspective purports itself to be liberal and egalitarian” (132).

Like Cushman, Ridolfo also demonstrates the need for scholars to collaborate with stakeholders. In “Delivering Textual Diaspora: Building Digital Cultural Repositories as Rhetoric Research,” Ridolfo describes the origins of a project funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) Office of Digital Humanities to digitize and provide access to the widely dispersed manuscripts of the Samaritan community. Perhaps best known for the biblical parable of the Good Samaritan, the Samaritans, once numbering hundreds of thousands, now number 760, living in two small communities in the Palestinian Authority and Israel. Due in part to long-standing economic pressures as well as a pattern of deceit by European scholars, the bulk of their written cultural patrimony, from historical manuscripts to sacred texts, exists in what Ridolfo calls a “textual diaspora” in museums and archives around the world. Only after engaging in field research and extended conversation with Samaritan Elders was Ridolfo able to understand the sustained impact of this textual diaspora and what digital delivery of manuscripts might mean for researchers and stakeholders alike. Although Samaritan Elders largely support the digitization and digital dissemination of their manuscripts, both to preserve and call attention to their cultural heritage, Ridolfo maintains that digitization “is not a neutral activity” (147); indeed, it comes at the cost of the return of their manuscripts to local control. Ridolfo’s work thus underscores the need for both trust and collaboration between researchers and stakeholders in digital archival projects. “In order for digital humanities to expand the realm of its concern from that of texts and what’s in them to how they are used by people and communities,” argues Ridolfo, “it needs to engage with rhetorical studies,” taking into account “the history of collections and current cultural stakeholder attitudes toward their present or future archival delivery” (148).

Rhetoric and composition scholars have long been concerned with how rhetors, particularly historically marginalized ones, gain rhetorical agency. In “East Texas Activism (1966–68): Locating the Literacy Scene through the Digital Humanities,” Shannon Carter and Kelly Dent suggest how digital innovations can help scholars and historiographers capture complex local literacy scenes by examining the intersections between local and national events that inform these scenes. Working from their project funded by the NEH Office of Digital Humanities, *Remixing Rural Texas*, Carter and Dent describe how in a rural East Texas town in the late 1960s, two African American college students, John Carlos (best known for his participation in

the Silent Protest at the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City) and Joe Tave, “used literacy for social justice” (153). While many of their activities have been recovered through traditional archival means, “much of [their] literacy scene,” Carter and Dent argue, “remains distorted and invisible,” due in part “to the limits of alphabetic text” (156).

To counter these limits, *Remixing Rural Texas* encompasses two key visualization tools: (1) a documentary remix video that juxtaposes dozens of archival sources “that might be otherwise difficult to ‘see’ together” (154), including depictions of the interanimated campus as well as national and international events that contributed to the local literacy scene; and (2) a digital annotation tool linked to the sources in the remix that “call[s] attention to layers of additional narratives and information not obvious in the remix alone” (159). Thus, these two digital projects simultaneously construct and deconstruct their own historical narrative, highlighting the means by which histories are composed, as well as the means by which archival artifacts “were originally created by human hands in literacy scenes often far removed from the one under investigation” (159). Carter and Dent further emphasize the importance of bringing local stakeholders into archival and scholarly digital projects, as this work could not have been produced without extensive feedback from and support of the local community.

In “From Location(s) to Locatability: Mapping Feminist Recovery and Archival Activity through Metadata,” Tarez Samra Graban describes another way to make the work of historiographic methodology more visible through her digital prototype, the Metadata Mapping Project (MDMP), which aims to allow users to examine and visualize women’s often hidden participation in rhetorical instruction in American colleges from the Progressive era to the present. This project, begun under the aegis of an Indiana University Bloomington Institute of Digital Arts and Humanities faculty fellowship, is “neither a digital archive nor an online exhibit of texts, but a user-contributed tool for tracking archival metadata” on primary-source materials (173).

Using the example of a somewhat obscure early twentieth-century composition instructor, Cecilia Hennel Hendricks, Graban demonstrates the power of MDMP to make visible and material the full range of “rhetorical activity for which there may not be circulating artifacts” (172). Despite a rich career, which included two appointments at Indiana University (from 1908–13 and 1931–53) where Hendricks served in a number of key administrative roles, a seventeen-year hiatus in Wyoming where she was active in public affairs, a sabbatical teaching in the South Pacific, and volunteer work teaching veterans after retirement, Hendricks’s extant archival record—in part because she did not widely publish—does not suggest the full range of her rhetorical activity and impact. MDMP helps to make these networks of activity visible by allowing users to locate them on maps as well as to search data fields that further materialize these connections. Moreover, because researchers are able to annotate the database themselves, MDMP will also articulate “concentrations of research activity

surrounding particular documents” (179). Graban argues that this process serves as a means of “materializing textual trust” (179) in the archive: “In the case of MDMP, this means acknowledging that *gathering* and *visualizing data* are the same process [. . .] It also means acknowledging that the views afforded by Hendricks’s different ecologies are not so much reflections on what *is there*, but dynamic snapshots of the kinds of questioning relationships researchers can potentially apply to her work” (185–86).

As editors of this special issue, we see these essays as contributing significantly to the still nascent conversation regarding how the digital intersects with the historical. These projects do not employ the digital for its own sake but seek to use digital tools to answer extant and evolving historical and historiographic questions. The contributors here confirm that we are indeed in a methodological moment, and they are guiding historians of rhetoric and composition to understand how we might seize this moment and take advantage of it.

NOTES

1. In the same year, 1996, that *Kairos* began as an online journal, *Computers and Composition* established a separate online edition, *Computers and Composition Online*. Faigley anticipated the rise of self-sponsored writing in online digital forums and encouraged us to attend to this “new medium of literacy” (37); Selfe argued for the need for humanist-oriented compositionists to start “paying critical attention to technology issues” (419) and the material conditions associated with text production and literacy; and Yancey called for new forms of writing instruction that address the emergence of multimodal—and often self-sponsored—forms of writing that circulate in digital environments.

2. Deep investment in this type of work is signaled by texts such as Daniel Cohen and Roy Rosenzweig’s *Digital History* and the establishment of centers of digital history such as the Virginia Center for Digital History and the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media at George Mason University.

3. Ramsey-Tobienne also investigates the process of digitizing archives in Ramsey, “Viewing the Archives.”

4. See also Haskins; Solberg; and Sullivan and Graban.

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