Introduction: The Challenge and Promise of Digital American Studies

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1 The Digital Transformation: With Melville, Beyond Moretti

A wide-ranging digital transformation of education is underway. Since the vast majority of students and researchers today are “permanently online, permanently connected” (Vorderer et al.), basic research activities in the humanities are being increasingly shaped and structured by digital infrastructure (Borgmann 1-20, Ayers 24). Access to information in particular is by now largely mediated through computational tools. Whether we rely on simple web-based library catalogues or on complex, distributed data-repositories, humanities researchers worldwide have become entangled with the larger processes of the digital transformation. As a consequence, the nature of academic publishing has also changed. Many academic journals and monographs appear in print and online, or are born-digital products only. Established online repositories such as JSTOR or EBSCOhost and less formal networks such as academia.edu, academic blogs, or Twitter enjoy widespread popularity. Most research libraries offer digital services, including single-sign-on access to journals, periodicals, eBooks, and more.

Over the last 20 years, the digital transformation has found its way into the every-day life of academics and scholars of all disciplines. The result is an environment that consists, as Christine Borgmann predicted in 2007, not of “small, local technologies that will be replaced quickly” but instead of “large-scale international investments in an infrastructure that can be expected to be in place for a long time” (2). The cultural work that these infrastructures perform has triggered a profound epistemological shift, a transformation that is “not unlike other great eras of cultural-historical transformation such as the shift from the scroll to the codex, the invention of moveable type, the encounter with the New World, and the Industrial Revolution” (Burdick et al. vii).

Attracted by the promises and challenges of this transformation, an increasing number of scholars are contributing to the field of digital humanities (DH). Given its roots in literary computing, media studies, as well as cultural and postcolonial studies, DH has counted Americanists, with their affinity for interdisciplinary research, among its earliest practitioners. In fact, one of the first DH projects has direct links to American Studies: In 1963 Mosteller and Wallace conducted one of the most influential computational authorship studies, conclusively confirming James Madison to be the author of twelve essays of the Federalist Papers. In 1992 another milestone in digital American Studies scholarship occurred: based on datasets established as early as the 1960s, under the leadership of Henry Luis Gates Jr., David Eltis, and Stephen Behrendt, the project Voyages—The Trans-
Atlantic Slave Trade Database created a comprehensive digital repository that documented more than 36,000 individual slaving voyages of the middle passage.¹ This database helped build a community of researchers engaging in a “dynamic, interdisciplinary resource” but also created an “open-access educational resource” that proved of great interest to schools, communities, and the general public (“Project Overview”). Indeed, several early digital projects in American Studies established counter-archives and alternative public spheres, thus combining a commitment to critical scholarship with public engagement. The well-known Chinese Railroad Workers Project and The Ward, the latter of which brings W. E. B. Du Bois’s 1899 sociological study The Philadelphia Negro to the social web of the twenty-first century.²

Digital scholarship in American Studies has also engaged with the question of canon building and revision: Ed Folsom and Kenneth Price’s online version of The Walt Whitman Archive as well as John Bryant and Wyn Kelley’s The Melville Electronic Library (MEL) have set standards for the curation and digitization of canonical works.³ John Bryant’s work on MEL provides an especially interesting example that may help clarify what digital scholarship brings to American Studies. Bryant’s research on what he calls the “fluid text” of Melville’s revisions has shown that digital scholarship may offer an alternative view on the materiality and procedural nature of “the text of America” (146). Arguing against what he sees as widespread hesitation on the part of Americanists to engage with the complex history of (their) sources, Bryant writes:

digital scholarship offers alternatives that can raise the consciousness of readers about the inherent fluidity of texts and the modes of revision that cause textual fluidity. [...] Editing revision involves new kinds of intervention and new forms of critical thinking that are best exercised along with a community of editors gathering at what I call an online ‘critical archive’. Even so, while digital technology is the most effective means by which readers may gain access to multiple versions and revision texts, it is also our greatest obstacle. (147)

Beyond the proverbial “reading between the lines” (168), such collections facilitate a movement between individual manifestations of texts that may produce new and unforeseen insights. At the same time, Bryant suggests, digital technology is at once a boon and a bane for scholarship. As collaborative and data-driven endeavors, these projects “proceed through a range of failures related to the inadequacy of one technical approach in the light of a better one that follows” (158). When he began his editorial work on Melville’s Typee in the mid-1990s, the technological affordances of digital tools were utterly unsatisfactory and proved unable to make users understand Melville’s manifold revisions. Even as the technological means became more refined—aided by XML-based annotations and scalable vector graphics that enabled the visual representation of and interaction

¹ In 2006, the project was turned into an online database and can be accessed at: <http://www.slavevoyages.org>.
with Melville’s manuscripts—the relation between scholarly work and technological affordances entailed a sort of fruitful failure:

As Melville put it, ‘Failure is the true test of greatness.’ But failure has no practical values unless it either promotes a deeper understanding of theory or engenders a consideration of whether one’s theory is the one to pursue. Technicians will tell you that anything can be done digitally—with ‘Time, Strength, Cash, and Patience’ (as Melville also once put it)—but once achieved, a technical solution (elegant or not) is worthless unless it sufficiently and coherently embodies a critical vision. (158)

Even if we grant a developing Digital American Studies (or any other field, for that matter) the need for productive failures, “Time, Strength, Cash and Patience” will remain points of concern—especially cash. In his recent attack on DH, Timothy Brennan made clear that many sceptics are first and foremost impatient with the large amounts of funding that have been “thrown in their [DH’s] direction” (12). Precisely because it is true that DH projects have attracted—and given their interdisciplinary nature and technical needs frequently do require—large amounts of funding, it remains vital for digital scholarship to “sufficiently and coherently embody a critical vision” (Bryant 158). Such critical visions are paramount in the development of computational approaches, and Bryant acknowledges that early projects in the field often favored technological development over self-reflection. Brennan is correct in saying that the “term ‘DH’ is not about introducing digital technologies where there were none before but rather about an institutional reframing. What people mean by ‘DH’ is a program and, ultimately, an epistemology” (Brennan 12). Indeed, the question of epistemology remains a central concern in digital scholarship. Most famously, Franco Moretti suggested that we replace close with “distant reading” in the study of literature. The kind of macroanalysis—to deploy Matthew Jocker’s related term—that has developed from Moretti’s controversial suggestion uses digital technologies to measure and compare large corpora of literary sources in the way archeologists employ airborne laser signals to map vast, unexplored sites. However, no archeologist worth their salt would suggest that flying airplanes to study sites eliminates the need for excavation in situ. The same may be said about the merits of distant reading. As Amanda Gailey writes,

The blind spots of search-based inquiry show us that the humanities computing community should encourage close reading; that is, we should ask ourselves how close reading can emerge because of and not despite the new tools available to literary scholars. (140)

Do digital procedures simply return us to the need for close reading then? If so, what do they contribute to an American Studies that embodies the critical vision advocated by Bryant while adhering to Melville’s demands of “Time, Strength, Cash and Patience”?5 As Lauren Klein has argued in a recent paper titled “Distant Reading After Moretti,” quantitative research needs to become more attuned to questions of power, race, class, and gender:

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5 The quote is from the cetology chapter of Moby Dick. Ishmael uses it as a meta-comment on his endeavor to combine the science of cetology with the art of writing a novel (125).
the view from a distance, is, of course, as much of a view from a particular place as a view from up close. And it may very well be that a distant view that is trained on power, and that is self-reflexive about the forces that enable it—cultural and conceptual as well as computational—can contribute, significantly, to the project of dismantling structural power.

Klein’s explicitly feminist intervention, delivered in the context of the #MeToo movement at the 2018 MLA Convention, accords with recent efforts in DH to construct more complex corpora, investigate less canonical forms, and include minoritarian or subjugated perspectives. As part of this development, scholars are increasingly acknowledging the need for additional and complementary scales of analysis rather than insisting on a simple dichotomy between close and distant reading. In some ways, this work continues a tradition established in earlier digital archives in English and American Studies, such as the Women Writers Project. At the same time, this research also leverages new computational approaches that move beyond an exclusive focus on text. The essays assembled in this special issue contribute to this new and emerging field of scholarship.

2 Digital Scholarship in American Studies: European and Transatlantic Interventions

As our examples so far have demonstrated, American Studies scholars based in the United States were among the first to engage in computational research. Earlier funding opportunities provided by the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), the faster pace of digitization, and the easy availability of relevant archives may all have contributed to this uneven development (Dunst 387). As the essays included in this special issue show, Americanists based at institutions outside of the United States bring their own, sometimes markedly different, perspectives to digital scholarship. Arranged in order of their chronological emphasis, these articles add several new perspectives to the computational study of U.S.-American history, literature, and culture—including transnational and feminist approaches.

With their article “Jonathan Edwards and Thomas Foxcroft: Pursuing Stylo-metric Traces of the Editor,” Michał Choinski and Jan Rybicki contribute to a tradition that reaches back to Mosteller & Wallace’s analysis of the Federalist Papers, but they also introduce a more fine-grained and historically situated version of authorship attribution. Polish DH scholars, including Rybicki and Macej Eder, have positioned themselves at the forefront of digital literary studies in recent

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6 See, for instance, the introduction by James English and Ted Underwood to their co-edited special issue.

7 The same holds true for the institutional history of DH within American Studies associations. The Digital Humanities Caucus within the American Studies Association (ASA) was established in 2009. The “Electronic Publishing Initiative” within the German Association of American Studies (BAAS/DGfA), initially founded in 2010, renamed itself “Digital American Studies Initiative” in 2015. In the last couple of years, panels dedicated to digital research have been taking place regularly at national and regional American Studies conferences.
years. The essay turns towards two prominent preachers of the colonial period and provides convincing evidence for Foxcroft’s editorial interventions into several publications that are usually attributed to Edwards. Choiński and Rybicki’s stylometric investigation, which compares the relative occurrence of the most frequent function words, pays attention to the basic characteristics of a text that have traditionally played little role in literary analysis. Stylometry not only raises interesting questions about literary conceptions of style, but also about our understanding of intellectual collaboration and constructions of the author. The essay also represents an example of how computational approaches may add new layers of analysis to American Studies methodologies, expanding our understanding of literature and literary scholarship. As the authors remark in closing, to reach their potential, these additional methodologies need to be seen as complementing rather than replacing established approaches, for “[o]nly the combination of quantitative and qualitative readings can help us understand the exact nature of the collaboration between these two great minds of colonial America.”

Faced with the novelty of digital methods, critical reflection on the connection between technological capabilities and scholarly concepts constitutes an ongoing challenge for researchers in the field. Where Choiński and Rybicki focused on the relation between stylometry as method and the concept of style, Katie McGettigan and Marie Léger-St-Jean explore how relational databases may resist an understanding of nineteenth-century print culture that focuses on individual authors and titles to emphasize their complex patterns of circulation and consumption. Databases allow for efficiently storing, linking, and searching large amounts of information. As a consequence, they constitute the foundational structure of much of our digital interactions today. McGettigan and Léger-St-Jean argue that these characteristics also allow researchers to establish new perspectives on a literary or cultural field, challenging existing knowledge and driving conceptual innovations. Their essay features two in-depth case studies: the first uses the extensive records of the British library to look at publishers’ series, a common way of reprinting literature in the nineteenth century that brought U.S.-American titles to a new readership across the Atlantic. The second case study focuses on so-called penny bloods: cheap serial or stand-alone titles that reprinted or adapted British, French, and American drama and fiction, often plagiarizing popular successes by authors like Charles Dickens or James Fenimore Cooper.8

McGettigan and Léger-St-Jean’s article emphasizes the importance of library and archival collections for digital scholarship. While DH is often associated with the technical solutions offered by computer science, equally important collaborations continue to be forged between humanities scholars, librarians, and archivists. These projects imagine new forms of presentation, pedagogy, and analysis and in the process rethink the boundaries of scholarly research and its ability to reach audiences with the help of digital formats. This very point is also made by Sonia Di Loreto in her essay, entitled “Decentralizing the Digital Archive: Reconstructing Margaret Fuller’s Transnationalism.” Di Loreto’s Margaret Fuller Transnational Archive (MFTA) aspires to reconnect Fuller, the American journalist, with the

8 See <http://www.priceonepenny.info>.
nineteenth-century network of European public intellectuals of which she formed a part during the 1840s. The MFTA realizes this aim by focusing on Fuller’s multilingual and transnational correspondence, mapping her travels across Europe and showcasing her fusion of political and personal engagement during a period of revolutionary transformations. At once an account of what it means to present research online without recourse to large amounts of funding and a critical repositioning of national archives, the essay celebrates the creativity of intellectual collaboration. In working with colleagues and libraries on both sides of the Atlantic, the author reflects that DH projects “have the potential to transform what frequently amounts to a solitary scholarly pursuit in the dusty, potentially unfriendly, territory of an archive into a cooperative and dialogical enterprise.”

A first wave of literary scholarship in DH—we have mentioned work by Moretti and Jockers in this introduction—frequently focused on the novel and modern drama to the exclusion of other forms. At times, this work betrayed a tendency to value sheer scale for its own sake, perhaps mirroring the efforts of the tech industry to acquire ever-larger data sets. In their consideration of canonical forms and frequent omission of concepts like gender or race, these projects replicated existing literary histories far more closely than they were willing to admit—albeit with the help of new methodologies. Yet if the results of such scholarship are any indication, automated computation alone is unlikely to rewrite our literary and cultural histories. Rather, the value of computation arguably lies in the differential corroboration or revision of chronologies and conceptual distinctions. Reacting to the broad strokes put forward by these projects and their difficulty in finding a middle ground between distant and close reading, a new generation of DH scholarship now frequently builds mid-sized corpora that offer more thorough contextualization and interpretive depth.

Stephanie Siewert and Nils Reiter’s contribution adds to this emerging research focus in their analysis of American short fiction. Building on a corpus of 123 stories spanning the years 1840 to 1916, the authors proceed from the explorative use of corpus analysis to a case study of a now largely forgotten text: Thomas Bailey Aldrich’s “Mademoiselle Olympe Zabriski” (1873). Digital literary studies would be unthinkable without the contributions made by computer and corpus linguists, and Siewert and Reiter’s essay represents another instance of dialogic collaboration across disciplinary boundaries. Applying standard linguistic as well as custom-built measures, their results lead them to question accepted assumptions about the short story: for instance, they find no evidence for the alleged decline in overall story length. Instead, the length of individual sentences decreases, as does the occurrence of extremely long and short sentences. Another finding, an increase in the number of proper names and the frequency of direct speech, leads them to a close reading of Aldrich’s “Mademoiselle Olympe Zabriski,”

9 See <http://www.margaretfullerarchive.neu.edu/margaretfuller/home>.
10 Or, more precisely: a first wave of research, mostly Anglo-American in origin and outlook, that popularized the term digital humanities and found readers outside of the more narrow field of literary computing. The latter dates back to the efforts of Father Roberto Busa, begun in 1949. See Hockey for a historical overview.
which foregrounds the story’s concern with class distinctions and changing gender roles in a rapidly urbanizing society. In the careful contextualization of its object of study and the expert tailoring of automated tools, the project moves between different scales of analysis to offer a nuanced and empirically grounded account of the short story.

An interdisciplinary outlook has characterized the project of American Studies from its inception. As we have seen, DH further reinforces the need to collaborate with a range of research traditions in the humanities and beyond. This challenge is especially pronounced in computational research that engages with visual art and culture. Whereas textual analysis and online archives dominated the first decades of DH research, the rapid development of computer vision now opens up media such as photography, film, television, comics, and computer games to digital analysis. The absence of established methodologies means that art history, media studies, and computer science are entering such research at the same time.

In the final contribution to this special issue, Frank Mehring’s article “Digital Photographic Grammar: Mapping Documentary Photographs” provides insight into the novel opportunities offered by such work. Taking his inspiration from the well-known photogrammar initiative associated with Yale University, Mehring draws on emerging methods in image recognition to propose an ambitious study of approximately 80,000 photographs that were taken as part of the cultural diplomacy that accompanied what was officially known as the European Reconstruction Program after World War II.

Alongside the articles by Di Loreto, and McGettigan and Léger-St-Jean, Mehring’s project stands as an example of the transnational perspectives that European scholars bring to Digital American Studies. The institutional location of the Marshall Plan photographs at the Library of Congress and its European subject matter as seen through the eyes of American photographers speaks of the complex entanglement of the two continents, and the ongoing renegotiation of their relationship. As digital scholarship seeks to make its mark on American Studies, its contribution will be measured by how it reconfigures our understanding of the United States and its future role in the world.

3 Making as Critique, or:
Towards a Methodology and Pedagogy of Digital Scholarship

What are the prospects and challenges facing computational scholarship in American Studies? And what precisely is the epistemological shift imbued by this digital transformation? As the contributions to this special issue show, digital scholarship is first and foremost a collaborative enterprise. For many DH researchers, an appropriate form for this collaborative work is to be found in the form of the lab. Be it the Stanford Literary Lab or the Göttingen Centre for Digital Humanities, these hubs have produced new forms of institutionalized interaction between humanists, librarians, archivists, designers, and engineers. As Greg

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11 See: <http://photogrammar.yale.edu/>.
Crane has emphasized, this “laboratory culture” also informs “a new culture of learning” in which “student researchers make tangible contributions and conduct significant research” (qtd. in Thomas III 531). This novel culture of learning adds a methodology of “thinking with” (colleagues and technologies) to established ways of “thinking about” (Rockwell and Mactavish 117). Steven Ramsay and Geoffrey Rockwell even talk about an “epistemology of building” (77) that collaborative DH projects establish in the interplay of research, computation, and design.

In more abstract fashion, a similar idea was expressed by Bruno Latour. In his much-debated essay “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?” he argues that faced with climate change deniers and right-wing think tanks which appropriate post-structuralist theory, humanists should aim to create spaces of critical debate and knowledge. Or as Latour summarizes polemically: “The critic is not the one who debunks, but the one who assembles” (246). The epistemology that derives from this thinking engages with the “maker cultures or makerspaces of our present moment” (Sayers 7). However, what distinguishes the focus on making as thinking in DH from the maker culture of the corporate world is a creative critique of the “normative assumptions and effects of popular maker cultures—usually white, cisgender, straight, male and able bodied” (Sayers 7). By the same token, such a methodology should seek to promote a digital literacy to understand the often invisible structures of oppression and domination embedded in digital technologies. To give an example: Echoing Simone Browne’s analysis of contemporary race relations, Jentery Sayers argues that the merely passive use—or actual ignorance of—digital media and computational tools facilitates a “prototypical whiteness” which “may manifest technically in infrastructure (e.g. how computer vision algorithms for face detection validate whiteness in relation to blackness), but also in how technologies are interpreted and embedded in contexts, with whiteness as the default setting for cultural reproduction” (6).

Given the pace and magnitude of the digital transformation, we believe that DH research has a central role to play in American Studies. The self-reflective use of computational methods and tools—from databases and online archives to stylometry and image recognition—enables students and researchers to critically engage with an increasingly algorithmic society. At the same time, these tools open up exciting new ways of accessing and reevaluating the historical record. With these opportunities come new challenges: digital methods demand expertise that is rarely ever individual and always interdisciplinary. Yet scholarly collaboration needs time and resources, whether they are located in institutional hubs or build on less formal networks of exchange. Not every university will be able or willing to support research that is often still experimental and leads to results that are difficult to accommodate within recognized formats of academic publication. Most importantly, perhaps, DH challenges scholars to become students all over again: in practice, this means visiting workshops, watching tutorials, and admitting one’s ignorance in the attempt to learn new skills. This experience can be exhilarating and sobering all at once, particularly for professionals whose self-image is built on notions of expertise. Conversely, as Crane writes, DH potentially

makes students into scholars, thus drawing research and teaching closer together. Here too, opportunities and challenges go hand in hand. While many students bring an enthusiasm for digital media technologies to the classroom, the need to acquire additional skills may clash with existing teaching requirements within highly structured BA and MA curricula.

Taken together, these challenges counsel against over-hasty announcements of an intellectual revolution. After the initial rush of excitement that elevated DH to the newest academic turn in the humanities (and the equally swift condemnation that followed), it may be time to return to the painstaking labor of research and a more deliberate dialog about methodology. This work is precisely what the essays collected in this special issue carry out: combining the critical traditions of American Studies with the affordances of the digital age, opening up additional avenues of inquiry, revising and corroborating disciplinary knowledge with the help of corpora and computational analysis, asking new questions, putting forward new arguments. Ultimately, it may be in the way that our contributors go about their scholarly practice that DH will make its biggest impact on American Studies: Sharing not only their results but the data they have collected and the software they have written, while working in larger networks of co-researchers on a daily basis. Or, as Andrew Piper has recently written:

Cultural criticism in its traditional form resembles an agonistic process—one continually overturns the views of others [...] The explicitness of cultural analytics [or computational cultural analysis] means that others can share in the steps of the analyst’s knowledge. They can correct those steps and challenge them, or they can build on them and refine them because those steps have been made more legible [...] Cultural analytics makes the study of culture more architectonic rather than agonistic, more social and collective. There is a basic politics to this practice that has largely been overlooked. (2016)

Digital scholarship’s contribution to American Studies might thus ultimately help us to develop a more democratic, more participatory, and more inclusive, field of study.

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