

Introduction

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Observing the title and concerns of this collection, many may wonder why we have chosen to focus on the *American* literature scholar; certainly the concerns of digital humanities are relevant across literary specializations. In fact, as other digital humanities scholarship demonstrates, the humanities as a boundary is itself suspect: it is not uncommon to see collaborations between a literary scholar, a computer scientist, and a librarian in digital humanities work. The artificial distinctions that have replicated the discipline divisions have become less relevant to those working in digital humanities, who often group around subject matter, not training. Add to this the increasing breakdown of national boundaries in literary studies, and perhaps it seems antiquated or anathema to reproduce *American* as a term with which to saddle a supposedly cutting-edge collection of essays.

Despite the pressures theoretical arguments put on “American” literary work, the profession continues to organize around traditional national models, and most scholars find it useful to self-identify as “Americanist” even as the term *Americanist* grows increasingly broad and disparate. This volume is meant to reach “Americanists” in the broadest sense. We have gathered a collection of essays from scholars working with American content in diverse and provocative ways. Some essays represent well-established work on canonical writers, others explore experimental ways of representing silenced cultural voices, and others look widely at the politics and methodology of our professional practices. What unites all of these essays is that they are concerned with the study of “American literature” and the interaction of that scholarly pursuit with digital technology.

Therefore, this book is not only or even primarily for those already professionally identifying with “digital humanities.” Rather, it is aimed at the large and varied community of scholars and teachers who are interested in how digital media is altering the way that we approach the study of American literature and culture. Along with many of our colleagues, we believe that we will see the success of digital humanities not through the creation of a powerful subfield in humanities scholarship but through thoughtful integration of digital methodologies and models of collaboration in humanities research. It is also our belief that engagement with the digital humanities will happen by both those who call themselves “digital humanists” and those who reject the term. Already, scholars conduct and receive a large portion of their research digitally. Few scholars peruse the MLA bibliography in print, preferring access to the online database. JSTOR, Project Muse, and digital delivery of materials by libraries are becoming the norm for journal articles. With the University of Michigan’s recently announced shift to a fully digital press, even the scholarly monograph is moving to a digital format. We expect that this trend will continue in the coming years, with digital media influencing all levels of scholarship. Not every scholar will create digital materials, but, eventually, all scholars will *use* some sort of digital materials. By gathering this collection together for our Americanist colleagues, we hope to further encourage the profession to consider how digital media is affecting all aspects of our scholarship and to recognize that there will be increasing benefits and challenges in the use of technology in scholarship.

As the following essays detail, utilizing digitization and computational power makes possible new ways of seeing, collecting, editing, visualizing, and analyzing works of literature. These new methods are at the core of professional academic life, altering not only what we can read through unprecedented access to textual information but also how we articulate our scholarly responses to materials. No longer is our scholarship limited to the print-confined genres of “essays” or “books” or “chapters.” Digital publication means that our scholarship may take the form of sprawling “thematic research collections,” algorithms that derive consequential meaning from enormous text corpora, or interactive visualizations of data derived from selected works of literature. Scholars are experimenting with 3-D visualizations, maps, images, movies, songs, spoken word, blogs, wikis, games, and more; in the next several years, we will likely see the normalization of

new genres of scholarly production, and those new genres will emerge predominantly from interactions with digital media. Additionally, the digital medium reorganizes the publication models that supported most academic research in the past century. The regularized, relatively clean separations between writers and publishers, editors and designers, or distributors and researchers no longer exist, and this restructuring comes at a crucial time of transition for scholarly presses, as financial models for press viability show that we cannot continue to rely on print monographs as the gold standard of the profession.

Importantly, though, we do not create new models of scholarship simply because we *can* (or, at least, that should not be the reason). We explore digitally enabled models because manipulation of scholarly materials in the digital medium allows scholars to think about these materials in new ways, to develop new methods of working with repositories or collections, and to consider how visual interfaces might express ideas more meaningfully. Computational power can also bring into focus qualities of studied texts and objects we have never before ascertained, and new apprehensions will enable new insight. This power is the most exhilarating quality of digital scholarship: combining established forms (such as narrative prose) with new tools (such as manipulable, high-quality images of rare objects or computational analysis of large data sets) can result in better work. The digital medium, if utilized properly, can make insights more powerful, evidence more transparent, and communication more effective.

Our existing digital scholarship is, however, the incunabula of the form; the mature realization of digital humanities is yet to come. It may be that the heady, exploratory, embrace-the-new atmosphere of the early twenty-first century will persist and that a heterogeneous approach will continue to rule the day. Alternatively, we may see codification of new digital genres within the next decade and, with it, the adjusted, settled definitions of the role each participant plays in the new scholarly publication process. The history of institutional development suggests that forces will push scholars toward standardization of forms, and for those made nervous by the upswing in technical terminology within humanities circles, such stratification of roles would be welcome. However, before forms begin to become calcified and naturalized, we need to think carefully about the implications of the trends. It is extremely important that we engage in intensive discussion about digital scholarship right now, as what we imagine and create at

this historical moment may be the model on which standardized forms are based.

While recognizing the powerful presence of certain kinds of digital scholarly forms, such as thematic research collections, this volume does not seek to limit the exploratory impulse driving many scholars interested in digital methods. Rather, we hope to encourage it. The diversity of our selection of essays for this volume is, we hope, a revealing snapshot of where we are in digital scholarship right now: contributors are thrilled by the possibilities, concerned about the glacial pace of professional infrastructure shifts, and eager to consider the intellectual implications of digital research. In selecting participants for the volume, we have looked to those who are involved in both the theory and practice of digital humanities. Our participants direct digital humanities research centers, edit archives and collections, and develop software and markup standards, as well as participate in the scholarly discussions about the field. We have also selected participants at varying stages of career—from entry-level assistant professors to endowed chairs—and from varied disciplinary paths, including librarians, humanities scholars, and technicians. We hope that these disparate voices will provide an entry into the topic and encourage questions from scholars who have not spent much time considering the impact of the digital on their work.

The digital approaches to American literary scholarship represented in this volume are not only a future potentiality but an important present reality. Digital scholarship is happening, and its future will be determined not by unknown and unseen forces but by those currently at work in the field. At this writing, however, it is still difficult for scholars in many academic departments to have digital scholarship properly evaluated during promotion and tenure reviews, and this resistance has pushed many of the more practical-minded to focus on traditional print scholarship, letting good—and often more ambitious—ideas for digital projects go unfulfilled. Departments and universities must work to develop clear tenure and promotion guidelines that address the shifting landscape of scholarly publishing. If we can open tenure and promotion criteria to consider a multiplicity of forms, we will nurture a new generation of innovative scholars and scholarship. The dominant model at many research colleges and universities requiring a single-author monograph for tenure and promotion is far too limiting and untenable in the current scholarly publishing climate.

To create a system that evaluates digital scholarship equitably, we need to build structures that promote confidence in the quality of new media materials. More specifically, we need to have reliable structures for peer review of digital content. Since much of born-digital content is self-published (i.e., scholars use the servers at their institutions to publish their digital content on the Web with no third-party entity validating the content prior to publication), the model of peer review must be expanded to evaluate such work. For many digital projects, peer-reviewed status can only come after the effort and resources have been expended to produce and publish the scholarship; the act of publication itself is not evidence of positive peer review. NINES (Networked Infrastructure for Nineteenth-Century Electronic Scholarship, at <http://www.nines.org>), a scholar-led organization founded by Jerome McGann and currently directed by Andrew Stauffer, is trying to address this issue. NINES has gathered various luminaries in Romantic, Victorian, and nineteenth-century American studies to serve as members of editorial boards, and these boards facilitate peer review of digital scholarship. Once vetted, the digital scholarly sites can boast a NINES logo signifying their peer-reviewed status and are also invited to aggregate their digital objects into the NINES search interface. If NINES can earn recognition as an important peer reviewer of nineteenth-century content, it has the potential to inspire alternative versions for other content areas.

To embrace digital approaches to humanities scholarship, we need to challenge traditional structures of our fields beyond just tenure and promotion criteria. We must revisit the very modes of scholarship production, the skill sets required for our scholarship, and the training of new scholars. Instead of replicating methods of work, we must match the work structure to the project. Some projects will continue to require sustained individual research. Other projects, including many outlined in this volume, are too big and require diverse skill sets demanding numerous participants in a collaborative group. We will need to envision the traditional training structures of graduate students, the future scholars in our fields, and the skills that they will require to produce scholarship in the new digital environment. This volume, we hope, is but an initial step in thinking through the inevitable impact the digital medium will have on the study of American literature and culture, one that shows the value of expanding our thinking about scholarly activities, methodologies, and questions.