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Review of *Global Debates in the Digital Humanities*

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Abstract

This article is a review of *Global Debates in the Digital Humanities*, the fourth and latest book in the *Debates in the Digital Humanities* series published by the University of Minnesota Press (2022). This volume is co-edited by Domenico Fiormonte (Roma Tre University, Italy), Sukanta Chaudhuri (Jadavpur University, India), and Paola Ricaurte (Tecnologico de Monterrey, Mexico).

Keywords

Book review, digital humanities (DH), Global South.

Author Bio & Acknowledgements

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Global Debates in the Digital Humanities is the fourth and latest book in the *Debates in the Digital Humanities* series published by the University of Minnesota Press (2022). This volume is co-edited by Domenico Fiormonte (Roma Tre University, Italy), Sukanta Chaudhuri (Jadavpur University, India), and Paola Ricaurte (Tecnologico de Monterrey, Mexico). The first volume in the series, *Debates in the Digital Humanities*, was published in 2012 and edited by Matthew K. Gold, now co-editor of the overall series.[1]

As its title implies, and unlike the previous three volumes, this one explicitly addresses the global digital humanities and states: "Focused on thought and work that has been underappreciated for linguistic, cultural, or geopolitical reasons, contributors showcase alternative histories and perspectives that detail the rise of the digital humanities in the Global South and other 'invisible' contexts and explore the implications of a truly global digital humanities." The co-editors go on to explain: "Geographically, the Global South is understood as comprising Asia, Africa, Oceania, the Middle East, and Latin America, and the Caribbean. Symbolically, it refers to all places located at the economic, cultural, and social margins of the industrialized world."

After a lengthy but highly informative introduction by the co-editors, the book is divided into three parts: *I: Global Histories of Digital Humanities*, *II: Exploring and Practicing Global Digital Humanities*, and *III: Beyond Digital Humanities*. Spread across these three sections are 24 individually or multi-authored essays. Each essay contains its own notes and bibliography. Brief author biographies close the book.

The strength of the *Debates* series is that it brings to the table multiple voices speaking to different aspects of the digital humanities (DH). In this volume, there is an intentional political bent, both historical and militant, made plain in the introduction. Authors represent "those communities that are economically, epistemically, and ontologically excluded regardless of their geographic location."

The book's authors address economic and social systems; structures of knowledge and technological production; materials, technology, and conditions of work; the environment; and labor. It should also be noted that the book was assembled during the coronavirus lockdown.

Almost as if to answer the question arising in readers' minds as to what all this has to do with the digital humanities, the co-editors succinctly explain: "These are all issues that digital humanities cannot afford to ignore any longer, since they involve our *digital choices*. Technology is neither neutral nor in neutral hands – just like the digital resources we create and distribute online every day."

Part I: Global Histories of Digital Humanities

The authors of the first two chapters in Part One look at text analysis tools and the archive respectively (S. Bhattacharyya, P. Purayil Sneha). Chapter three discusses the role of blogging and open access in digital humanities and how these tools can challenge academic hierarchies (E. Priego). The next chapter questions the "Big Tent" metaphor of DH and develops a postcolonial and Queer critique of digital humanities, drawing on the personal research of the author (R. K. Gairola) in South African and Indian "digital queer worlds." Three chapters look at digital humanities in Russia (I. Kizhner, M. Terras, B. Orekhov, L. Manovich, I. Kim, M. Rumyantsev, A. Bonch-Osmolovskaya,) Poland (M. Maryl), and China (J. Chan, L. H. Tsui). The last chapter looks at the broad theoretical issues surrounding the pursuit of digital humanities in the Global South (N. Rodrigues-Ortega).

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[1] For a review of the original *Debates in the Digital Humanities,* see Jenni M. Rodda (2016), "Review of *Debates in the Digital Humanities*," *VRA Bulletin* 43, no. 2: https://online.vraweb.org/index.php/vrab/article/view/59

Part II: Exploring and Practicing Global Digital Humanities

Most of the 10 chapters in Part II derive from a particular DH project or projects, which is logical considering they address the *practice of digital humanities*. This practice, however, seems to center on text analysis and archives for the most part and issues related to them: linguistic, bibliographical, epistemological, cultural, historical. To this reviewer's mind, this is an ongoing problem with books on digital humanities, be they single- or multiple-authored: they seldom deal with the visual. While text analysis is approached from every angle and with multiple digital tools, seldom do we see discussions of how digital representational technologies can be used to interrogate 2D and 3D objects and monuments from both the past and present. Questions are provoked and can often be better answered through the use of spatial analysis, 2D and 3D modelling, data visualization, historical GIS mapping, representations of change over time, or visualizing the past.

The authors in Part II discuss issues surrounding the problems of working with non-Western languages in chapters on Bengal (P. Auddy), East Asia (A. Horvath), China (C. Clark, L. Zhang, S. Roth), Mexico (E. M. Trigueros), South Asia (D. Roy, N. Menon), Russia (S. Gavrilova), the Borderlands (M. E. Alvarez, S. Fernandez Quintanilla), and even the Talmud (I. Marienberg-Milikowsky). The last two chapters of Part II address the realities of a lack of human and technological resources or working in more remote locations (M. J. Afanador-Llach, A. Lombana-Bermudez) or with materials on hidden women's histories (D. Bareto Avila).

Part III: Beyond Digital Humanities

The six chapters in Part III, as the name implies, look to the future. And that future is decidedly political, if not militant: "issues and plans of action drawing on the theory and practice of digital humanities but having a wider social application, even serving to innovate and reform social and cultural practices in societies undergoing profound change."

The first chapter of Part III (G. del Rio Grande) poses a question about the relationship between technological, social, and knowledge infrastructures. This is followed by an essay (J. Steyn, A. Goodrich) on the limited access and lack of networking infrastructure in remote locations and their effect on DH. The third chapter looks at *gambiarras* in Brazil: "technical material improvisations that emerge within a context of scarcity, where there is a need to overcome challenging situations" (C. Dalla Chiesa, L. Foletto). Situated DH as a tool for women's empowerment (A. Gurumurthy, D. Bharthur) is discussed in the next chapter. Both the intersection of DH with information and communications technologies and development and the role of language in DH comprise the fifth chapter in Part III (T. Unwin). Finally, the last chapter in *Global Debates* analyzes the consequences of the exploitation of Africa's natural resources.

As the co-editors note: "If the ultimate end of practicing DH in the Global South is to expand and flatten the terrain of global cultural politics, these essays illustrate the complex, multistrand means to that end…how DH exercises in the Global South must engage fundamentally with issues and problems for which anglophone researchers and developers in the North already have solutions at a basic level, solutions the denizens of the South must seek from scratch."

Not only does *Global Debates in the Digital Humanities* provide essays that challenge the standard, academic discourse on digital humanities in North America and Europe, but it also brings to light the serious challenges inherent in engaging with the digital humanities in a meaningful way in the Global South. The essays shed light on linguistic, cultural, labor, resource, and postcolonial problems that DH practitioners of the Global South encounter.

Global Debates in the Digital Humanities provides a broader (non-Western), illuminating look at the issues and problems with the digital humanities in the context of the Global South. It deserves to be on every DH practitioner's bookshelf and in every academic library.