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Letter from the Guest Editors

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Dear Reader,

Welcome to our special issue of the [VRA Bulletin](#), “The Root of Things: Grounding the Digital Humanities in an Increasingly Groundless World.” In this issue, we seek to think about what digital humanities (DH) means in a world that is becoming increasingly digital while also less humane. As we noted in the call for proposals, “This issue seeks to tackle how we, as digital humanists, archivists, librarians, and otherwise find solid ground to work from as we face an onslaught of precarity exacerbated by systemic injustice.”

When Ángel David Nieves, Cassie Tanks, and I, Alanna Prince, first began discussing the publication of this special issue, our conversations were fueled by a mix of frustration and anger, but also deep love, care, and admiration for our colleagues who were already doing exceptional work. We wanted to highlight their contributions, to hold them up as examples of what great scholarship looks like. Our goal was simple: to say, “Look at what they’ve done, this is what good work looks like – *you can do this too.*” As you read this issue, I encourage you to not only appreciate the scholarship presented here but also see it as a source of inspiration for your own visions and ambitions.

Tanks and Nieves had long envisioned this project before I joined the conversation. They had worked closely together across two different institutions, collaborating on digital humanities initiatives like [Apartheid Heritages](#) and [The Reckonings Project](#), among many other DH and pedagogical excursions. By the time I entered the picture, they had already begun their early conversations. Standing in the graces of these two brilliant and close-knit scholars, I knew this issue *must* be attended to. I sought to serve what they were passionate about, and from there, we built this special issue.

That was in 2023, and although only a short time ago, the landscape has changed dramatically. At the time we first began discussing this project, our understanding of large language models (LLMs) and artificial intelligence (AI) like OpenAI’s ChatGPT, X’s (formerly Twitter) Grok, and Alphabet’s Gemini, were still nascent. Conversations about their ethics and usage were just beginning in our circle and we were not quite ready for their explosion into instant ubiquity. Still, regardless of the value one may place on them, they cannot replace the human – there is no replication of the care, thoughtfulness, and nuance of a human being, the digital humanist. Not even the most cutting-edge and sophisticated of programs can effectively produce what our scholars can. This issue is dedicated to showcasing that very fact. We also now mourn the loss of the titan Ángel David Nieves in December of 2023, whose brilliance was immeasurable. His passing is deeply felt and has profoundly impacted everything since. The issue is just the beginning of Tanks’ and my pledge to keep his vision for the digital humanities alive.

In this first step, we aim to breathe new life into conversations about the digital humanities. Now, when even well-funded and beloved projects are stalled by staffing and labor challenges when institutions are forced to crack down on, and even eliminate, the humanities programs that drive the inquiries, and when brilliant scholars are pushed out of the academy and no longer able to contribute, is the time we must double-down. We cannot allow human thought, care, and inquiry to be erased by AI or dismissed by a lack of institutional foresight and investment.

This issue is a call to action: to dig our roots deeper and become taller, stronger. The work presented here is a testament to the vitality and potential of the digital humanities, and a challenge to us all to continue pushing forward in a world that often seems to prioritize efficiency and cost-effectiveness over what we have to offer.

Our articles “Grounding Digital Scholarship in the Analog: Reimagining Library Fellowships Post-Pandemic” by Amanda Licastro and Roberto Vargas, and “Queens United: Building a Descendant Community Network” by Joni Floyd and Kevin Porter both exemplify the necessity of

the human. Licastro and Vargas' work explores the significance of the analog in relationship to the digital – something that only a human may contemplate. From there, they use this point of inquiry to reimagine new types of fellowships that are invested in social justice, ones that affirm all parts of one's humanity. Floyd and Porter's work is a testament to the importance of the human story. In the wake of increasing political hostility that seeks to defund and erase Black history, their work highlights the significance of cultural heritage workers who fight to make sure the historical narratives of the Black community are documented and remembered. Neither project can be replicated by anyone but them, they are irreplaceable.

We thank you for your time and your consideration of this special issue. We hope it inspires and empowers you.

Warmly,

Alanna Prince, Ph.D.

(on behalf of Cassie Tanks and Ángel David Nieves, Ph.D.)

Cassie Tanks is an archivist, public humanist, aspiring historian, digital humanist, and first-generation student originally from San Diego, California. She is pursuing a Ph.D. in World History at Northeastern University, has an M.S.L.S. from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and a Bachelor's in History from San Diego State University after earning an Associate of Arts at San Diego Mesa Community College. Tanks' work focuses on the borderlands of North America and southern Africa, imperialism and decolonization, and U.S. foreign policy through spatial, community archival, and transnational liberation lens.

Alanna Prince is a scholar of literature, Black culture, feminism, and the digital humanities. She has earned degrees from Bates College and Northeastern University. She was recently awarded her Ph.D. in September 2024 for her dissertation *Luminous Black: On Making Time, the World, and the Self in Black Women's Poetry*. She has worked with the National Parks Service, GBH, and The Early Caribbean Digital Archive. You can learn more about her scholarship and pedagogy at alannaprince.com.

Ángel David Nieves was a Professor of Africana Studies, History, and Digital Humanities and Director of Public Humanities in the College of Social Sciences and Humanities at Northeastern University. Nieves authored *An Architecture of Education: African American Women Design the New South* (2018/2020) and co-edited *'We Shall Independent Be:' African American Place Making and the Struggle to Claim Space in the U.S.* (with Alexander, 2008). Nieves received his Ph.D. from Cornell University in the History of Urban Development and Africana Studies, an M.A. in Socio-Cultural Anthropology and Women's Studies from Binghamton University (SUNY), and a professional Bachelor of Architecture degree from Syracuse University.

Appendix A

Perhaps one of the sounds I miss most is the sharp hand clap and full-throated cackle Dr. Ángel David Nieves would make when people dropped into *Apartheid Heritage(s)* project meetings and dared to ask about the work.

“What are you guys working on?” – an innocent enough question.

In answer, Dr. Nieves filled the room with his infectious laughter, saying, “Get ready for Cassie to nerd out on you!” And nerd out I did. Excitedly launching into an explanation of the spatial critical digital archive I have been working on that complemented Dr. Nieves’ scholarship and upcoming publication, people would usually ask, “How could an online archive be *spatial*?” An image of artifacts we had digitized would inevitably be pulled up on the display before saying, “See this ‘toy’ CASSPIR? Well, it is an archive in itself and takes us not just to South Africa, but to Germany, the United States, Switzerland, Britain...” If I had known that the regular weekly team meeting I sat down for early last November would be our last meeting, our last post-meeting *chisme*-fest, our last normal conversation then I...I don’t know what I would have done.

[Dr. Ángel David Nieves](#) passed away on December 5, 2023, suddenly and incredibly unexpectedly, reuniting with his husband of nearly 30 years who joined the ancestors earlier that same year. The accolades of his nearly three-decade career are numerous – a giant in the field of digital humanities, the head of so many departments at prestigious universities across the United States, and one of the very, very few Queer and person of color full professors. Remembrances published by the [University of Maryland](#), the [Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media](#), [the Alliance of Digital Humanities Organization](#), [San Diego State University’s Digital Humanities Center](#), and [Northeastern University](#) are but a few examples of the incredible impact of his fierce advocacy for students and social justice, and unwavering commitment to making our campuses, our neighborhoods, our *world* a better and more just place. In the year since he left this world, students he mentored, faculty he fought to have recognized and promoted, community members he collaborated with, and so many others who found themselves in his orbit, have had to deal with the loss of his energy and care.

The common threads that emerge when people share stories of Dr. Nieves are threefold. First are eye-wateringly funny stories of his quips, sense of humor, and nothing short of comical situations he would get himself and those he cared about in. Second are examples of how *humane* and *human* he was, a truly rare quality in academia. The other is stories about the curiosity and love of knowing that he inspired and fostered in people, such as the love of visual resources and spatial thinking that he inspired in me.

Dr. Nieves understood and championed the intellectual, cultural, communal, and pedagogical importance of visual resources. Over the course of his career, he created incredible 3D spatial recreations that were annotated by images and artefacts that challenged the dominant – often unjust – historical narrative, developed critical digital archives – such as the *Apartheid Heritage(s)* archive I was so fortunate to work on – that meaningfully challenged traditional metadata schemas and traditional ways of presenting items. He brought together oral histories, artifacts, creative works, and images that may not exist anywhere were it not for his ability to quickly snap a picture in digital multi-media spaces that were often created collaboratively with community members.

Over the course of his career, he carefully curated a collection of anti-apartheid posters, vinyl records, t-shirts, pins, documents, postcards, press photos, glass-lantern slides, and a multitude of other forms of visual and print media that illuminated the rich history of South Africans’ fight for

freedom and justice. It was the boxes and boxes of this collection that I would sit cross-legged in front of, carefully scanning or photographing, while we chatted sometimes about the project but more often about life.

This is admittedly a small special edition. But Dr. Ángel David Nieves would be fine with that. “Dream big, start small, iterate and scale up,” he said so often, “and don’t take no ****.”

Cassie Tanks, MSLS
World History Ph.D. student at Northeastern University

Please consider donating to, or applying for, [the Digital Humanities Summer Institute Ángel David Nieves Memorial scholarship](#) when it becomes available for 2025.