

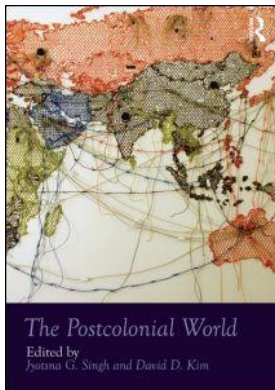
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## **The Postcolonial World**

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### **Breaking and Building**

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PART VI

POSTCOLONIAL CULTURES  
AND DIGITAL HUMANITIES



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## CHAPTER NINETEEN

## BREAKING AND BUILDING

The case of postcolonial  
digital humanities

*Roopika Risam*

The 2014 Modern Language Association Convention saw the first panel on postcolonial digital humanities,<sup>1</sup> an emerging line of inquiry that seeks a dialogue between the global analyses of knowledge production and power within postcolonial studies and the praxis-driven field of the digital humanities. Topics included decolonizing digital humanities, digital archival silences, postcolonial game studies, the postcolonial digital human, and building global scholarly networks, demonstrating the range of conversations proliferating at the confluences of postcolonial studies and digital humanities. Though a new term framed through emerging conversations about digital humanities, “postcolonial digital humanities” encompasses a broader history of contact between postcolonial criticism and the digital milieu. Since the early 1990s, postcolonial scholars have embraced the affordances of digital media to produce knowledge about the field.<sup>2</sup> In the last decade, science and technology studies has engaged with postcolonial thought through “postcolonial computing,” a critique of development discourse in technology design.<sup>3</sup> More recently “decolonial computing” has brought critical race theory into conversation with theories of postcolonial computing.<sup>4</sup> New media scholars have turned to postcolonial thought as well, considering digital subalternity and networks of capital, communication, and power that mediate between global communities.<sup>5</sup> Within the digital humanities, postcolonial scholars have produced digital scholarship in the form of cultural heritage, archival, and mapping projects.<sup>6</sup>

Indebted to this intellectual genealogy, postcolonial digital humanities brings together the ethos of making, building, and creating of the digital humanities with critiques of imperialism in regimes of knowledge and power that emerge from postcolonial studies. The “postcolonial” in postcolonial digital humanities gestures towards the significance of postcolonial theory for theorizing the seeming absence of ethnic, national, or ideological considerations in digital humanities.<sup>7</sup> Theories of hybridity, subalternity, and globalization are central to postcolonial digital humanities, as is the connection between imperialism, power, and knowledge production identified by postcolonial critics. “Digital humanities” denotes the emerging interdisciplinary field of study that engages with computational technology and digital media in the service of humanistic inquiry.<sup>8</sup> These definitions are not intended to suggest that digital

humanities is untheoretical or that postcolonial studies is not concerned with praxis. Rather, the two bodies of work in their synthesis and engagement yield surprising and keen insights on technology, power, and knowledge production through anti-imperialist lenses and on a global scale. In this vein, postcolonial digital humanities operates dialectically, bringing postcolonial studies and digital humanities together to reveal the possibilities at the juncture of the material and the theoretical.

Mediating at the intersections of praxis and theory, of building and breaking, postcolonial studies brings to digital humanities the question of representation within knowledge production. As such, postcolonial digital humanities offers a language to ask of digital humanities important questions such as who is speaking, who is being spoken of, who is spoken for, which languages are being used, and what assumptions subtend its production, distribution, and consumption. At the same time, digital humanities offers postcolonial studies a model for negotiating the relationship between praxis and theory.

Among the tensions that emerge when putting postcolonial studies and digital humanities in conversation are the competing roles of theory and praxis within the two. Intersections of postcolonial studies and digital humanities suggest that the two approach the relationship between theory and praxis from different vantage points: from theory to praxis in postcolonial studies and from praxis to theory in the digital humanities. Critics of postcolonial studies, for example, have suggested that the field's basis in European critical theory yields critiques of Eurocentrism that are themselves Eurocentric. Moreover, they contend that the often jargon-heavy language of postcolonial theory remains inaccessible to the people whose conditions postcolonial critique purports to theorize. In such critiques, the field appears less concerned with political praxis than the reproduction of the conditions of production for postcolonial criticism itself.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, one of the primary debates in the digital humanities has been over whether one has to “build” to be a digital humanist.<sup>10</sup> Emphasis on building has led critics to charge that the field is under-theorized, privileging the creation of tools over analysis. Yet, by looking more closely at the role of building in digital humanities, we find productive overlap with concerns about representational practices and inclusion from postcolonial studies. While the relationship between Eurocentrism and building, at face value, seem incommensurate, they exemplify the ways that theory and praxis have been taken up in postcolonial studies and digital humanities, respectively.

To examine the relationship between theory and praxis, I take up the relation between “building” and “breaking” in the digital humanities to explore continuities between postcolonial critique and digital humanities scholarship. For digital humanists, knowledge and theory have been thought to emerge through praxis, uncovered in the building of databases, the act of coding, or the creation of a map. For postcolonialists, “building” conjures acts of empire-building or nation-building, processes that shape the creation and dissemination of knowledge and incur suspicion of it. If the act of “world-making” is both empirical and ideological, what of the virtual worlds produced through digital humanities? More recently, renewed conversation has appeared around the role of “breaking” in the digital humanities. The act of dismantling produces new ways of knowing and understanding and theories that emerge from undoing. Such figurations of breaking as a form of unmaking to make anew echo processes of decolonization – not simply the collapse of empire

and decolonization of the nation-state but also the decolonizing of the mind that so often remains incomplete.<sup>11</sup> The impetus for postcolonial studies lies in the sense that postcolonial theory can recognize the latent forms of imperialism that persist within histories and cultures. Such recognition is a precursor to understanding the possibilities of political praxis, which may arise from theory. Put in conversation with each other, postcolonial studies and digital humanities share a conceptual vocabulary for how knowledge is produced, despite radically different approaches.

## EPISTEMOLOGIES OF DIGITAL BUILDING

One issue central to postcolonial digital humanities is how conversations around building shape the politics of inclusion and exclusion in the field. At the 2011 Modern Language Association Convention Stephen Ramsay gave a talk called “Who’s In and Who’s Out,” setting off a furor over the question of belonging. The talk canonized the thorny issue of who “counts” as a digital humanist and, by extension, what the digital humanities is. In his now-famous statement, Ramsay said, “Personally, I think Digital Humanities is about building things.”<sup>12</sup> He goes on to clarify that he interprets “building” broadly in a way that “includes and should include people who theorize about building, people who design so that others might build, and those who supervise building.”<sup>13</sup> This watershed articulation of inclusion and exclusion identifies a relationship between the act of building and the definition of the digital humanities: one must build to be a digital humanist. There seems to be some measure of latitude in what constitutes the act of making – though this is subject to debate as well. However, the title of Ramsay’s talk alone suggests the very questions of authority, inclusion, and influence raised in postcolonial scholarship. The question of “Who’s in and who’s out?” and its relationship to building is often raised in conjunction with concerns over lack of inclusive representation within digital humanities. Even when difference is acknowledged, it tends to produce a monolithic other of the digital humanities, distancing difference from the mainstream digital humanities community. Postcolonial digital humanities, framed as a “global exploration of race, class, gender, sexuality, and disability within cultures of technology,”<sup>14</sup> however, embraces the investment of postcolonial feminism in specificity within the broader category of difference and an awareness of the structural limitations that shape experiences of difference within digital humanities.

Ramsay’s remarks reflect anxieties over the relationship between theory and praxis in the digital humanities. The move of defining digital humanities through building privileges praxis over theory, drawing a line in the sand that denotes what does or does not count as digital humanities. A definition like “digital humanities applies humanistic methods to digital objects cultures” – which seems implied by the term itself – would not be sufficient because it fails to acknowledge the role of building in the field’s practices and methodologies. Emphasizing the significance of building, the book *Digital Humanities* (2012) argues: “The mere use of digital tools for the purpose of humanistic research and communication does not qualify as Digital Humanities.”<sup>15</sup> That is to say, simply using an existing tool does not a digital humanist make. For example, using Voyant Tools, a web-based textual analysis environment that generates word clouds, summaries, vocabulary density, and a corpus reader, would not necessarily be “digital humanities” by virtue of use alone. These narrow definitions

distinguish between the digital humanities and fields like new media studies or critical code studies, which privilege analysis over creation of media, creating specious divisions between them. Moreover, they reinforce a false binary between “hack” (coding, building, doing) and “yack” (talking, critiquing, theorizing), concepts that have come to characterize the digital humanities but have become so distorted that they lack much currency for critique.<sup>16</sup> The focus on building has led to charges that digital humanities is insufficiently theorized. In response, Geoffrey Rockwell has suggested, “[Digital humanities] is under-theorized in the way any craft field that developed to share knowledge that can’t adequately be captured in discourse is.”<sup>17</sup> Put another way, digital humanities is an epistemology of building.<sup>18</sup> All “yack” emerges from “hack.”

As such, theories of digital humanities arise from praxis. From the act of creation emerges the *je ne sais quoi* of the digital humanities: knowledge produced when an act of scholarship transcends the realm of textual inquiry through a methodology of making. This is an idea that Rockwell describes as the “craft knowledge” of the digital humanities, likening the field to a trade comprised of manual labor where building is done by hand.<sup>19</sup> Matt Bouchard calls digital humanities a form of trade knowledge, “filled with awe, beauty, and knowing that few are talking about.”<sup>20</sup> Kathi Inman Berens suggests a connection between manual elements of building and ways of knowing: “learning how to build requires your sense of how things work. . . . There’s some kind of recursive loop between the fingers and the brain. . . . [N]ow my fingers know it to be true.”<sup>21</sup> Ryan Heuser echoes Berens’s invocation of a tactile experience. He links an epistemology of building to Bourdieu’s work on the aesthetic disposition, a tendency towards detachment that he suggests is “arguably the form of knowing at the center of the ‘traditional’ Humanities.”<sup>22</sup> Building, he explains, “is the opposite of detachment. Building is a form of creation. Creation is the ultimate participation.”<sup>23</sup> Heuser provides a careful description of the knowledge-building intersections in digital humanities:

We in DH know we are building models. . . . And we love and learn from it. We seek to mold ourselves into the shape of our objects. . . . Knowledge for us is an active process. A relentless dialectic of self and other.<sup>24</sup>

Tom Scheinfeldt links the concept of “building as knowing” to the history of science, in which knowledge is produced through engagement with tools. Sometimes, he notes, tools are developed to answer questions, while at other times, answers are a by-product of tool production.<sup>25</sup> These examples suggest that knowledge in digital humanities is not only discursive. That is to say, knowledge produced through the material act of building is not readily translatable to discourse – and certainly not to the language of poststructuralism that “theory” connotes. Those who champion the role of building in the digital humanities do not want to see the craft knowledge of digital humanities supplanted by theoretical scholarship. These tensions have parallels with key debates in postcolonial studies, particularly over the relationship between materiality and theory. Those who favor material specificity find the relationship of postcolonial theory to poststructuralism controversial, arguing that it is prone to charges of jargon-heavy appropriation of the political struggles of dispossessed subaltern groups.<sup>26</sup> The critique of discourse within postcolonial studies in favor of greater engagement with materiality echoes how digital humanities favors ways of knowing beyond discourse.

From digital tools to empires, building is a primary site of inquiry within postcolonial digital humanities. From a postcolonial perspective, we might consider how building within digital humanities constitutes an act of world-making. Digital humanities scholarship has not always recognized the influence of imperial or colonial ways of knowing on the development of the field. This is a particularly important concern, given the role of technology in the construction of channels of power, knowledge, and capital in which the digital humanities is implicated.<sup>27</sup> The field is not unique, in the sense that its power dynamics derive from its articulation within the North American and Western European academy. Yet it leaves its relationship to global forms of power unexamined while espousing a philosophy of openness, inclusion, and niceness that is admirable but does not negate its implication in these regimes of knowledge.<sup>28</sup>

Viewing building as a type of world-making with the potential to replicate dimensions of colonialism yields further insight on the debate over “hack” and “yack.” These absences are revealed in the ways that digital humanities treats coding as a form of world-making. The metaphor of world-making is apt for the practices of coding but troubling as well. Matthew Kirschenbaum describes programming as “a unique and startling way of looking at the world . . . in fact, a kind of world-making.”<sup>29</sup> The coder becomes the world-maker, charged “to specify the behaviors of an object or a system from the ground up.”<sup>30</sup> Kirschenbaum identifies a link between the work of the programmer and that of a writer like Jane Austen, whom he calls “one of our ultimate system builders and world-makers.”<sup>31</sup> When we code, we make worlds, determining the rules that prescribe the system and the defining characteristics of the environment, an act that echoes the colonial enterprise. Accordingly, Kirschenbaum notes, “Programming is about choices and constraints, and about how you choose to model some select slice of the world around you in the formal environment of a computer.”<sup>32</sup> His students create worlds when they model realistic snowballs, a task that requires designing the world in which the snowball exists, attending to rules and observable characteristics. Such a task requires defining details like how snowballs are made, the circumstances under which they melt, the way snowballs travel through space. In short, Kirschenbaum argues, to model a plausible snowball requires the creation of the world in which the snowball inhabits. By “world,” Kirschenbaum means “something very much like model, a selective and premeditated representation of reality, where some elements of the real are emphasized and exaggerated, others are distorted and caricatured, still others are absent altogether.”<sup>33</sup> Kirschenbaum links the world-making of programming to the world-making of literature through grammar – from the simple building blocks of syntax, subjects, actions, and objects arise whole plots, indeed whole worlds. Through such a connection, he exemplifies the intimate link between digital and humanistic inquiry that emerges through building. Kirschenbaum acknowledges the fault in these acts of world-making; virtual worlds are empirical but they are not objective and “embody their authors’ biases, blind spots, ideologies, prejudices, and opinions.”<sup>34</sup> That is to say virtual world-making, like colonial world-making, is an ideological act that is not neutral but is embedded in historical, social, political, and economic specificities. He also notes that the “world” being made is neither singular nor static because “reality can be sliced and sampled in an infinite variety of ways.”<sup>35</sup> Further, Kirschenbaum identifies the forms of knowledge that emerge from building virtual worlds, an epistemology comprised of “interactive, manipulable, extensible . . . sites of exploration, simulation,



play.”<sup>36</sup> As models of the physical world, virtual worlds can provide a new way of accessing and understanding the world around us. Yet, we can only do so if we understand the ideological nature of the enterprise and the possibility of replicating colonial dimensions of power. Our experience of technology as an inscrutable black box, along with the role of building in digital humanities, leads to emphasis on “hack.” This itself is not a problem, so long as we attend to the ways digital technologies can reproduce colonial regimes of knowledge. Therefore, the work of postcolonial digital humanities requires openness to the role of building as an avenue for understanding the colonial dimensions of world-making and for developing strategies to counter their effects on digital humanities as practiced.

As Kirshenbaum has suggested, programming is one exercise in the creation of new worlds in virtual spaces. Geographic information systems (GIS) allow us to create not only maps but new ways of mapping the world through spatial data. Digital archives offer seemingly limitless ways of preserving, arranging, and disseminating knowledge. Yet the contexts in which much of the building within digital humanities is done often fail to account for the ways it reproduces existing inequalities, many of which are the legacies of colonialism. Code, standards, and design aesthetics are contextual and constructed, not universal. Despite the access they afford, digital archives are prone to the same exclusions as print ones. A new map does not necessarily reshape the dynamics of power that structure space and place. As a result, digital humanities risks conjuring the world-making of the colonial project in digital form. This includes physical dimensions of colonialism – settler colonies, maps, colonial archives – as well as the intangible aspects – new legal systems, literature, colonizing of the mind. A cornerstone of modernity, colonialism has built our contemporary world. Additionally, it has created the ways we *know* the world.

The question, then, is how the relationship between praxis and theory can be productively negotiated to ensure digital humanities does not simply reproduce hegemonic patterns in knowledge production. An epistemology of building in the digital humanities serves as a bridge between the material and the discursive. In the knowledge produced, we can look for exclusions and dynamics of power that emerge around representation. Such an approach has roots in theories of materiality, including Kirshenbaum’s description of “forensic” (physical traces of an object) and “formal” (compositional) forms of materiality<sup>37</sup> and Johanna Drucker’s argument for “performative materiality,” which engages with critical theory to construct a framework of analysis for understanding materiality beyond forensic and formal attributes, towards embodied user experience. In doing so, she makes the case for renewed attention to the role of theory in digital humanities.<sup>38</sup>

More recently, digital humanities projects have begun productively negotiating the relationship between theory and praxis to redress the power dynamics that center the putative “West” in digital humanities. Alex Gil’s *Around Digital Humanities in 80 Days (AroundDH)* is a prime example that identifies gaps in representation that emerge from other projects and builds new models for addressing them.<sup>39</sup> For 80 days, Gil and a team of editors produced entries featuring digital humanities projects from around the world on a website that sought to rewrite the map of the global digital humanities. The new map challenges the existing model of global digital humanities, an infographic by Melissa Terras that quantifies the numbers and locations of digital humanities centers around the world. Terras’s map depicts a digital humanities dominated by the U.S.,

U.K., and Canada.<sup>40</sup> In its conception, design, and execution, *AroundDH* provides a useful case study of interventions possible in the digital humanities around issues of inclusion and interface. By virtue of its engagement with alternate forms of representation, *AroundDH* builds a project and a map, remaking the world of digital humanities. Each of the 80 days offered new points on a map of digital humanities, and after 80 days, the world of digital humanities was revealed to be global indeed.

In its conception, which began with Gil's habit of sending regular emails to colleagues highlighting digital humanities projects from around the world, *AroundDH* resembles the "empire writes back" strategy of postcolonial writers who sought to correct misrepresentations of their histories and cultures that reinforced colonial attitudes by revising or rewriting dominant narratives.<sup>41</sup> Theoretically informed by this move in postcolonial studies, the project typifies the idea of building as "methodology-as-epistemological-wedge," using building as a methodology to fundamentally alter the regime of knowledge. In the case of *AroundDH*, the map of digital humanities itself is called into question; indeed, Gil's map is becoming a new visual for how global digital humanities is understood, in place of Terras's. Such an approach that mediates between the hack/yack binary exemplifies Bruno Latour's identification of a discursive shift from critiquing to composing, which he describes as using a hammer to "repair, take care, assemble, reassemble, stitch together" rather than "break down walls, destroy idols, ridiculous prejudices."<sup>42</sup> Rather than simply stating a critique, Gil's project surveys the global landscape of digital humanities and carefully builds a model to generate new forms of knowledge from which theories of digital humanities may emerge. Berens and Brian Croxall suggest that there is a link between Ramsay's radical hermeneutic of building and criticism, describing both of them as a "lapidary process: slicing the facets of the same gem."<sup>43</sup> *AroundDH* exemplifies this intimate relationship between building and theorizing in the digital humanities, drawing attention to the ways that a digital humanities centered on the U.S., U.K., and Canada fails to account for the work that goes on around the world. Moreover, *AroundDH* reveals the challenges to a global digital humanities, from partnerships between U.S. universities and those in other countries, some of which send uni-directional – verging on neo-colonial – support for digital humanities around the world, to the local practices that support or contravene development of digital humanities, such as communities that are skeptical of digital cultural heritage or archival projects. Yet, this is knowledge that has only emerged from Gil's efforts to intervene in representation in the digital humanities.

Moreover, Gil designed the project with access in mind to ensure that the *AroundDH* website would load quickly regardless of internet infrastructure. In doing so, he has demonstrated better practices for more accessible projects, an important contribution to the theoretical apparatus of digital humanities. As a result, *AroundDH* demonstrates that design is one area where praxis and theory meet. This is an idea that Jean Bauer has championed, in response to arguments that theory is somehow separate from project development:

Every digital humanities project I have ever worked on or heard about is steeped in theoretical implications AND THEIR CREATORS KNOW IT. And we know it whether we are classed as faculty or staff by our organizations. Libraries and other groups involved in digital humanities are full of people with advanced degrees in the humanities who aren't faculty, as well as plenty of people without

those advanced degrees who know the theory anyway. . . . When we create these systems we bring our theoretical understandings to bear on our digital projects including (but not limited to) decisions about: controlled vocabulary (or the lack thereof), search algorithms, interface design, color palettes, and data structure.<sup>44</sup>

The development of *AroundDH* exemplifies Bauer’s argument of theory by design. The project was created using minimal computing, “an intellectual concept, akin to environmentalism, asking for balance between gains and costs in related areas that include social justice issues and de-manufacturing and reuse, not to mention re-thinking high-income assumptions about ‘e-waste’ and what people do with it.”<sup>45</sup> In practical terms, minimal computing eschews high-bandwidth or high-performance desktop computing in favor of more accessible practices. With minimal computing in mind, Gil chose the Jekyll open-source platform for its low-bandwidth, creating a simple, static website. Intended to load quickly around the world, across varied internet infrastructures, *AroundDH* is text-based and does not rely on a database. That is to say, the project demonstrates how an awareness of postcolonial critiques of globalization and technology, particularly around issues of access, wealth, and uneven development, can be enacted in the design phases of digital humanities project development.

## FROM BUILDING TO BREAKING

The flip side of building, “breaking,” has gained currency within digital humanities as well. The move towards breaking is loosely derived from Jerome McGann and Lisa Samuels’s work on “deformance,” which Mark Sample describes as “an interpretive concept premised upon deliberately misreading a text, for example, reading a poem backwards line-by-line.”<sup>46</sup> There are both implicit and explicit approaches to the digital humanities that constitute breaking. The implicit forms take the shape of critique, which reveals exclusions and representational gaps in digital humanities, such as recent critiques of labor within the field. Natalia Cecire, for example, considers how the ways of doing prescribed by the digital humanities is spoken in terms of manual labor of the “white, male, blue-collar variety. . . . ‘hands-on,’ ‘getting your hands dirty,’ ‘dirt’ (as in the Digital Research Tools wiki), ‘digging’ (as in the Digging into Data Challenge), ‘mining,’ and of course ‘building.’”<sup>47</sup> Signaling the relationship between labor and identity, Cecire calls attention to the intersections of race, gender, and class within digital humanities. Addressing class from a different perspective, Alan Liu raises concern about exclusions on the premise that building something, like a structure, requires not only the *builder* but also a range of professionals whose labor raises the building. As such, Liu agrees with the link between building and knowing, “so long as we recognize the multiplicity of builder roles (including the importance of interpreters, critics, and theorists in the enterprise, many of them the same people as the coders, etc.)”<sup>48</sup> In doing so, he proffers a critique of implicit hierarchies of power that privilege particular forms of labor when there are a range of roles that are needed to develop a project. Mark Marino also notes the troubled nature of labor implied within the building debates:

The aspect of learning by copying and then modifying, which is true of so many literacies, has such a crucial role in programming culture – or even

learning by finding some code and reverse engineering it in your head or with the documentation – that this notion of “building” or (and this is getting close) “building something on your own” – reveals itself to be a notion whose time is finally up.<sup>49</sup>

He suggests that cutting, pasting, and modifying code is so ingrained in the practice of building that the nature of building is called into question. Additionally, coding is a highly skilled form of labor, knowledge of which is available to very few. As Miriam Posner has noted, coding is a practice that is not neutral; men – white, middle class men in particular – are more likely to have been encouraged to code at an early age.<sup>50</sup> As a result, barriers exist along lines of class, race, and gender. Moreover, *how* to build is subjective, a point that David Golumbia has made: “If you think back ten years, many applications that required real coding, and then later required knowledge of some building skills, can today be done by people who know nothing that could be called ‘coding.’”<sup>51</sup> He suggests that within the digital humanities, the investment in building is being used in the service of a powerful group of digital humanities elite who *can* code to silence those who cannot. As Golumbia suggests, the coding debate, which is divisive in nature, has been used to downplay the contributions of scholars whose work is deeply invested in digital dimensions of their disciplines on the basis of a lack of engagement with building. Subtending these critiques is the unspoken question of whose labor is valued, a question that recalls critiques of globalization and development within postcolonial studies. Even beyond the labor sources for digital humanities projects – project directors, coders, graduate students – we must consider the global dimensions of labor. These would include the people, often in developing nations, who are producing technologies, often for low wages.

Such dynamics remind us of the fraught power relations that structure technology and knowledge production on a global scale, an issue often left unexamined within digital humanities. For example, sharing has been represented as an affordance of the digital milieu. Sample suggests:

We are no longer bound by the physical demands of printed books and paper journals, no longer constrained by production costs and distribution friction, no longer hampered by a top-down and unsustainable business model. And we should no longer be content to make our work public achingly slowly along ingrained routes, authors and readers alike delayed by innumerable gateways limiting knowledge production and sharing.<sup>52</sup>

Because of the freedom offered by digital media, the digital humanities transfers agency onto the participants to share:

We have the opportunity to distribute that future more evenly. We have the opportunity to distribute knowledge more fairly, and in greater forms. The “builders” will build and the “thinkers” will think, but all of us, no matter where we fall on this false divide, we all need to share. Because we can.<sup>53</sup>

Sample proposes that *sharing*, rather than *building*, is at the heart of the digital humanities because “the digital reshapes the representation, sharing, and discussion

of knowledge.”<sup>54</sup> In doing so, he shifts the discourse over building in a more optimistic direction. Yet, we would do well to consider that this may be the case for digital humanists in the U.S., Canada, or Western Europe but such access is not necessarily a global phenomenon. In their critiques of building, such arguments effect an undoing – an attempt to dismantle or to break apart the power dynamics reproduced within the digital humanities.

Aside from implicit forms of breaking are explicit ones that emerge from the digital humanities. We might conceptualize hacking, one of the vaunted forms of building in the digital humanities, as a form of breaking. Paul Fyfe has argued that digital humanities has “made hacking a discipline,” defining “hacking” as to “adapt, manipulate, and make productive use out of a given technology or technological context or platform.”<sup>55</sup> Cecire proposes that we might understand hacking as “an embodied, experiential, extra discursive epistemology,” or what the history of science dubs “tacit knowledge.”<sup>56</sup> Through hacking, tacit knowledge emerges as an element of breaking – of code, of firewalls, of passwords, of existing structures. As Tad Suiter suggests, “A hacker is a person who looks at systemic knowledge structures and learns about them from making or doing.”<sup>57</sup> To build is to hack, to hack is to break, to build is to break.

Yet, breaking has an explicit dimension as well, as an act of deformance or new understanding produced by the taking apart or unmaking of an object. Such a move evokes the power of decolonization to create new knowledge by dismantling existing regimes of knowledge. In his “Notes Towards a Deformed Humanities,” Sample examines an additional frame to the notions of building and sharing that undergird the humanities, digital or otherwise. Destroying things, Sample proposes, is “a complementary mode of learning and research that is precisely the opposite of building things.”<sup>58</sup> As such, Sample suggests we embrace “a theory and practice of a deformed humanities. A humanities born of broken, twisted things . . . a piece of paper contorted into an object of startling insight and beauty.”<sup>59</sup> However, deformance, Sample notes, is “a key methodology of the branch of digital humanities that focus on text analysis and data-mining.”<sup>60</sup> He cites Ramsay’s work in *Reading Machines*, linking digital humanities to deformance – “taking apart a text – say, by focusing on only the nouns in an epic poem or calculating the frequency of collocations between character names in novels.”<sup>61</sup> Jesse Stommel raises a similar issue when he states, “Digital humanities is about breaking stuff.”<sup>62</sup> The key concept emerging here is that knowledge is produced by the act of dismantling. We might view the results as radical, emancipatory acts that free new forms of knowledge from the persistent forms in which they are trapped, just as the ideal of decolonization offers hope of how a change in episteme may be possible. Thus it is through breaking – as well as building – that digital humanities produces knowledge and the questions we must ask to understand the relationship between hack and yack and how it might be marshaled in service of liberatory ends.

### CODA: THE CHALLENGES OF INTERDISCIPLINARITY

A final dimension to consider about the relationship between digital humanities and postcolonial studies is how fields are built and the challenges that both postcolonial studies and digital humanities have faced in the consolidation of their fields.

Constructing a field necessarily entails provisional, collective agreement on a set of values to achieve critical mass. Therefore, we might understand the act of defining the digital humanities as an echo of Gayatri Spivak's early work on strategic forms of essentialism, the "strategic use of essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest."<sup>63</sup> It is through strategic essentialism that we can provisionally accept the limits of a shared label, in exchange for the recognition and power that it accords. Yet, at the same time, we understand the limitations of embracing strategic essentialism: the erasures enacted by recourse to a singular label, the unbuilding inhered in the act of building. Any attempt at collectivity, particularly within an interdisciplinary field, produces a tension between sacrifice of difference and the pursuit of expediency. Debates within postcolonial studies – whether the definition of "postcolonial," the applicability of postcolonial thought to different national contexts, or the relationship between discourse and the material – reflect the limitations of naming and defining a body of work. However, arising from such limits are productive avenues of scholarship that keep moving the field forward. Similarly, debates within digital humanities arise from the fraught task of definition. Kirschenbaum has elaborated on the difficulties of defining digital humanities, more recently in his third in a series of essays on the term "digital humanities." He suggests that what is called "digital humanities" is a discursive construct perpetuated through blogs and social media.<sup>64</sup> As Ramsay suggests, building (of community) is an imperative in the digital humanities. Yet, the ideal of a built digital humanities community is contravened by the material realities of a field *built* on the same elements that shape all fields: "money, students, funding agencies, big schools, little schools, programs, curricula, old guards, new guards gatekeepers, and prestige."<sup>65</sup> That is to say, for all the dubiously idyllic notions of community, collaboration, and niceness its scholars tend to embrace, the digital humanities must operate within the constraints that shape academia writ large. Therefore, the question of (self-) definition is one with which digital humanities, like any interdisciplinary field, must grapple.

For digital humanists, debates on building exacerbate the anxieties that circulate around strategic acts of essentialism required to consolidate a new field. As the digital humanities has received unprecedented attention within the humanities,<sup>66</sup> the questions of where the limits of the field are, who's "in," and what "counts" as digital humanities are especially keen. When Ramsay revisits these questions in the follow-up piece "On Building," he addresses these anxieties, though not with the intention of allaying them. Rather, he reiterates that the unifying factor among digital humanities scholarship – regardless of the domain of knowledge influencing the work – is "moving from reading and critiquing to building and making."<sup>67</sup> From this post emerges a core – but debatable – tenet of digital humanities: reading an object as a text is a different experience than creating an object or a text. The act of building produces knowledge that could not be gained without an act of making: hacking, creating, building, marking up, coding.

In our contemporary moment, digital humanities occupies a similar position that postcolonial studies and other emergent, theoretically inflected or identity-based fields encountered during the culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s. The fields raise fear of whether close reading would be sacrificed for more politically expedient frames of analysis or the sacredness of the text would be profaned by new methodologies. Such a link emphasizes the radical moves that postcolonial studies and digital humanities

have made as new frames of analysis, despite the radical differences between them. Their interdisciplinarity offers both the possibilities of multidimensional scholarship as well as the pitfalls of navigating the boundaries between disciplines. Yet, as we continue to probe the points of contact between postcolonial thought and the digital humanities, we will find more ways to productively negotiate the relationship between theory and praxis offered by each.

## ENDNOTES

1. The term “postcolonial digital humanities” was coined by Adeline Koh and me in 2013 and disseminated through the Twitter hashtag “#dhpoco.” Our intention was to identify and build a community of scholars within digital humanities, new media studies, science and technology studies, and rhetoric and composition whose work engaged with postcolonial theory. Responses to the term have ranged from excitement to derision, but interest in postcolonial digital humanities has remained steady. In addition to the 2014 and 2015 MLA Conventions, both the South Asian Literary Studies Association and Humanities, Arts, Science, and Technology Alliance and Collaboratory (HASTAC) conferences have included panels on the relationship between digital humanities and postcolonial studies. HILT (Humanities Intensive Learning and Teaching) 2015 included the course *Post/De/Colonial Digital Humanities*. A number of articles in the *Differences* 25.1 special issue “In the Shadow of the Digital Humanities” engaged with the question of whether the role of difference – race, class, gender, sexuality, ability – is adequately addressed within digital humanities scholarship, citing an open thread on the topic that appeared on the #dhpoco website and generated much debate. *Journal of Victorian Culture* 19.3 included a forum on postcolonial digital archives, while a forthcoming issue of the journal *Ada* picks up on themes of postcolonial digital humanities by examining the relationship between gender, technology, and globalization.
2. Two important examples are Deepika Bahri’s *Postcolonial Studies at Emory* and George P. Landow’s *The Postcolonial Web*, which featured entries on postcolonial writers, critics, and key theoretical concepts. These sites were aimed primarily at advanced undergraduate and graduate students and played an important role in how postcolonial studies has been defined since the 1990s. While Landow’s site is now dormant, Bahri’s was updated and revamped in 2012.
3. In her work within science and technology studies, Sandra Harding has long made the case for putting postcolonial studies, feminist theory, and science and technology studies in conversation with each other. Such a combination, Harding proposes, allows scholars to rethink narratives of technological development centered on the “West,” in terms of theory and praxis. To do so is to revisit scientific traditions from non-Western cultures with an eye to the perspectives offered in other knowledge traditions. Moreover, it enables an examination of how both imperialism and colonialism have shaped value within scientific discourse. In her work, Harding makes the case for multicultural approaches to science. Emerging out of science and technology studies is an approach to postcolonial computing. Developed by Lilly Irani, Janet Vertesi, Paul Dourish, Kavita Philip, and Rebecca Grinter, “postcolonial computing” responds to developments in Human-Computer Interaction for Development (HCI4D), a scholarly community addressing the intersections of technology and development. Irani et al. frame their critique of development within HCI4D in terms of postcolonial discourse, to underscore the vexing questions of authority, power, and legitimacy evoked in the rhetoric of development. In contrast to development-focused engagement, postcolonial computing offers an alternative lens on designing and analyzing technology. It foregrounds the dynamics of culture and power subtending design

practices, arguing in favor of the particular over the universal. Postcolonial computing emphasizes cultural specificities to challenge more general presumptions about “good” design practices. As human–computer interaction has become more of a global phenomenon, the idea that design aesthetics or systems are universal has been called into question. To understand this phenomenon, Irani et al. propose that postcolonial approaches to science and technology studies offers insight on how cultural encounters and their colonial dimensions shape technology design. By invoking a *postcolonial* approach to computing, they decenter the primacy of “Western” forms of knowledge in favor of a localized approach that broaches cross-cultural engagement with awareness of the effects of uneven development on design.

4. Syed Mustafa Ali has used the term “decolonial computing” to offer another alternative. He grounds decolonial computing in critiques of social contract theory raised by Charles Mills and decolonial theories of the Global South articulated by Walter D. Mignolo among others. Ali argues that even in progressive approaches to computing, such as “postcolonial computing,” insufficient attention has been paid to the role of systemic racism and white supremacy, which Mills argues subtends the social contract. Ali’s problems with postcolonial computing lie in their embrace of postcolonial theory, which Ali argues is unconsciously Eurocentric and privileges a culture of political economy and therefore fails to theorize racial materiality. By embracing decolonial thought in his approach to computing, Ali suggests that decolonial computing works from the peripheries, not the European center, and foregrounds the possibilities of delinking and the border, with emphasis on embodiment and situatedness. To exemplify the possibilities of decolonial computing, he considers artificial intelligence, asking the decolonial question of humanoid robots – what is the role of race in the making of faces for humanoid robots – are humanoid robots masking important questions about race by virtue of their design? While Ali’s articulation of “decolonial computing” is relatively new, it builds on his work on the relationship between critical race theory and technology and offers a new dimension to thinking through the questions of power that computing engenders.
5. Radhika Gajjala’s work in *Cyberculture and the Subaltern*, for example, examines silence and voice online, engaging with the intersections of globalization and technology as a frame of analysis. Pramod Nayar’s work on digital dalits also examines the relationship between subalternity and cyberspace. Maria Fernandez has articulated the concept of “postcolonial media theory” in efforts to recoup the under-explored relationship between postcolonial studies and electronic media.
6. Examples range from *Bichitra: Online Tagore Variorium*, which digitizes Bengali writer Rabindranath Tagore’s writing; Kavita Daiya’s *1947.org*, a collection of oral histories of India’s Partition; and Alex Gil’s *Around Digital Humanities in 80 Days*, which articulates a map of the global digital humanities with entries showcasing the rich and varied nature of digital humanities projects around the world.
7. There have been important interventions in questions of race, gender, ethnicity, and other categories of difference in digital humanities. These include several articles in *Debates in Digital Humanities* (2012), edited by Matthew K. Gold: Alan Liu’s arguments in favor of cultural critique in digital humanities, Tara McPherson’s work that suggests the racial biases underlying the development of UNIX and other technologies have led to the digital humanities being white, and Amy Earhart’s suggestion that the affordances of digital technology have enabled recovery work in African American studies. In spite of these examples, digital humanities tends to privilege canonical writers – a direct result of the fact that much of the data available for study itself reflects canonicity – and more work remains to be done to diversify the field.
8. The definition of “digital humanities” is a contested one. In its broadest articulation, which I am evoking here, digital humanities is an umbrella term for a range of approaches



- bridging humanistic inquiry and technology that are variously called humanities computing, corpus linguistics, computers and writing, and new media studies.
9. Walter Mignolo's critique of postcolonial studies questions its relationship to continental philosophy, arguing that its Eurocentrism domesticates its political content. His work on decolonial theory makes the case for delinking critiques of imperialism from European frameworks to create space for other knowledges, perspectives, and epistemologies.
  10. "Building," "making," and "doing" constitute forms of praxis in digital humanities.
  11. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's book *Decolonizing the Mind* (1986) outlines the psychological violence of colonialism and its effects on the mind. He differentiates between the physical subjugation of the colonial enterprise, which took the shape of law, policing, and embodied violence, and the psychic subjugation effected through education systems and suppression of local languages.
  12. Stephen Ramsay, "Who's In and Who's Out." <http://stephenramsay.us/text/2011/01/08/whos-in-and-whos-out/>
  13. *Ibid.*
  14. Roopika Risam and Adeline Koh, "Postcolonial Digital Humanities." <http://dhpoco.org>
  15. Anne Burdick, Johanna Drucker, Peter Lunenfeld, Todd Presner, and Jeffrey Schnapp, *Digital Humanities* (Cambridge: MIT, 2012), 122.
  16. Bethany Nowvickie, "On the Origin of 'Hack' and 'Yack.'" <http://nowvickie.org/2014/on-the-origin-of-hack-and-yack/>
  17. Geoffrey Rockwell, "Inclusion in the Digital Humanities." <http://www.philosophi.ca/pmwiki.php/Main/InclusionInTheDigitalHumanities>
  18. "Epistemology of Building" is a concept developed by Ramsay and Rockwell to articulate a materialist epistemology that locates the role of building in scholarly activity.
  19. Rockwell, "Inclusion in the Digital Humanities."
  20. Matt Bouchard, "Re: On Building." <http://stephenramsay.us/text/2011/01/11/on-building/>
  21. Kathi Inman Berens, "Building the 'About': Coding Changes How and What I Teach." <http://kathiiberens.com/2011/07/20/building-the-about-coding-changes-how-what-i-teach/>
  22. Ryan Heuser, "Re: On Building." <http://stephenramsay.us/text/2011/01/11/on-building/>
  23. *Ibid.*
  24. *Ibid.*
  25. Tom Scheinfeldt, "Where's the Beef." <http://foundhistory.org/2010/05/wheres-the-beef-does-digital-humanities-have-to-answer-questions/>
  26. Such critiques have been made by postcolonial scholars including Aijaz Ahmad and Arif Dirlik. In his book *In Theory* (1992), Ahmad criticizes postcolonial scholars who have wedded their work to poststructuralist theory instead of Marxism. He suggests that such formulations of postcolonial studies become ideologies of their own that privilege the interests of the postcolonial bourgeoisie and American and Western European intellectuals. In *The Postcolonial Aura* (1998), Dirlik proposes that postcolonial studies risks its own credibility if it ignores the effects and outcomes of the history of colonization on our contemporary moment in favor of discursive formulations of power alone.
  27. Drilling down from the surface of digital humanities reveals a complex network of power relations that enable the field to exist. These may include the various forms of labor that help produce a project and how credit is distributed among professors, project directors, #alt-ac staff, librarians, and graduate students. Beyond the academy, the very technologies with which digital humanities projects engage are deeply implicated in questions about the relationship between globalization and technology. For example, these technologies are produced under a range of labor practices, some of which are exploitative and engage low-wage labor in the Global South. They may also discourage local development through brain drain, typified by the waves of Indian IT workers brought to the United States on H1B visas.

28. Tom Scheinfeldt has noted a trend among new digital humanists: “One of the things people often notice when they enter the field of digital humanities is how nice everybody is.” This ideology of niceness is an element of digital humanities exceptionalism, a sense that the field is not fraught with many of the negative qualities that others are. Accordingly, in “Why Digital Humanities Is Nice,” he notes, “This can be in stark contrast to other (unnamed) disciplines where suspicion, envy, and territoriality sometimes seem to rule.” The role of niceness in digital humanities has been questioned. In “Introduction: Theory and the Virtues of Digital Humanities,” Natalia Cecire notes that niceness is just one of a set of ground rules for the digital humanities and it is easy to be “nice” when “one is not routinely met with casual racism . . . and the costs of niceness – and of refusing to be nice – are distributed unevenly across race, gender, class, academic status and rank, and other social factors.” Matthew Kirschenbaum has suggested that “niceness” is contravened by “asymmetry of networked relationships” in “The (DH) Stars Come Out in LA.” Meanwhile, Liz Losh has proposed that “generosity” may be a better intellectual framework than “niceness” in “Respect, Niceness, and Generosity.”
29. Matthew Kirschenbaum, “Hello Worlds.” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 23, 2009. <http://chronicle.com/article/Hello-Worlds/5476>
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid.
37. Matthew Kirschenbaum, *Mechanics: New Media and the Forensic Imagination* (Cambridge: MIT, 2012), 11.
38. Johanna Drucker, “Performative Materiality and Theoretical Approaches to Interface.” *Digital Humanities Quarterly* 7.1 (2013). <http://digitalhumanities.org/dhq/vol/7/1/000143/000143.html>
39. *AroundDH* is available at <http://arounddh.org>
40. Terras’s *Quantifying Digital Humanities* infographic is available at <http://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/dh/2012/01/20/infographic-quantifying-digital-humanities/>
41. The phrase “The empire writes back” originates in Salman Rushdie’s statement in *The (London) Times* that “the empire writes back to the center.” Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin developed this idea further to theorize the work of postcolonial writers “writing back” to the center in an attempt to reshape power dynamics delineating between center and periphery.
42. Bruno Latour, “An Attempt at a Compositionist Manifesto.” *New Literary History* 41 (2010): 475.
43. Kathy Inman Berens and Brian Croxall, “Building Digital Humanities in the Undergraduate Classroom.” <http://www.briancroxall.net/buildingDH/>
44. Jean Bauer, “Who You Calling Untheoretical.” *Journal of Digital Humanities* 1.1 (2011). <http://journalofdigitalhumanities.org/1-1/who-you-calling-untheoretical-by-jean-bauer/>
45. Jentery Sayers and John Simpson, “Minimal Computing.” <http://www.globaloutlookdh.org/minimal-computing/>
46. Mark Sample, “Notes Towards a Deformed Humanities.” <http://www.samplereality.com/2012/05/02/notes-towards-a-deformed-humanities/>
47. Natalia Cecire, “Introduction: Theory and the Virtues of Digital Humanities.” *Journal of Digital Humanities* 1.1 (2011). <http://journalofdigitalhumanities.org/1-1/introduction-theory-and-the-virtues-of-digital-humanities-by-natalia-cecire/>
48. Alan Liu, “Re: On Building.” <http://stephenramsay.us/text/2011/01/11/on-building/>

49. Mark Marino, "Re: On Building." <http://stephenramsay.us/text/2011/01/11/on-building/>
50. Miriam Posner, "Some Things to Think About Before You Exhort Everyone to Code." <http://miriamposner.com/blog/some-things-to-think-about-before-you-exhort-everyone-to-code/>
51. David Golumbia, "Re: On Building." <http://stephenramsay.us/text/2011/01/11/on-building/>
52. Mark Sample, "Digital Humanities Is Not About Building." <http://www.samplereality.com/2011/05/25/the-digital-humanities-is-not-about-building-its-about-sharing/>
53. Ibid.
54. Ibid.
55. Paul Fyfe, "Digital Pedagogy Unplugged." *Digital Humanities Quarterly* 5.3 (2011). <http://digitalhumanities.org/dhq/vol/5/3/000106/000106.html>
56. Cecire, "Introduction."
57. Tad Suiter, "Why 'Hacking'?" In *Hacking the Academy*, ed. Dan Cohen and Tom Scheinfeldt. <http://www.digitalculture.org/hacking-the-academy/introductions/#introductions-suiter>
58. Sample, "Notes Towards a Deformed Humanities."
59. Ibid.
60. Ibid.
61. Ibid.
62. Jesse Stommel, "Digital Humanities Is About Breaking Stuff." <http://www.hybridpedagogy.com/journal/the-digital-humanities-is-about-breaking-stuff/>
63. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York: Methuen, 1987), 205.
64. Matthew Kirschenbaum, "What Is 'Digital Humanities' and Why Are They Saying Such Terrible Things About It?" *Differences* 25.1 (2014): 46–63.
65. Ramsay, "Who's In and Who's Out?"
66. As Carl Straumsheim has noted, digital humanities is variously viewed among academics and in the higher education press as a savior of the humanities, killer of the humanities, creator of jobs, destroyer of dreams – and everything in between. See Straumsheim, "Digital Humanities Bubble." *Inside Higher Ed*, May 8, 2014. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2014/05/08/digital-humanities-wont-save-humanities-digital-humanists-say>
67. Stephen Ramsay, "On Building." <http://stephenramsay.us/text/2011/01/11/on-building/>

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