

13. DH and the American Literature Canon in Pedagogical Practice

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DIGITAL HUMANITIES PEDAGOGY IS, by now, a well-established area of scholarly inquiry, with practitioners and theorists producing articles, journal issues, and books dedicated to its study.¹ This volume, though, is unique in its decision to examine digital pedagogy within the context of American literature scholarship. As I have argued in my recent monograph, *Traces of the Old, Uses of the New: The Emergence of Digital Literary Studies*, the practice of digital humanities is fluid, altered by the space and structure in which it is employed, whether in research or the classroom.² So too is the case with the application of digital pedagogies to American literature, where in the classroom we ask students to engage with concepts of nationhood, place, difference, genre, and historical, social, and cultural context. Perpetually evolving through critical debate, such ideas are reflected within the classroom by not only how we teach but by what we teach. While we might assign students tasks that use digital humanities techniques, such as simple data mining exercises or editing and archiving projects, the connection between digital humanities and American literature is not formed by practice alone but is intimately linked to the historical development of activist digital projects that expanded the American literature canon.

By the 1980s we were at the height of the canon wars, a battle over what counted as American literature. Feminist critics such as Judith Fetterley, Nina Baym, and Jane Tompkins rejected the assessment of “literary greatness [on] ahistorical, transcendental ground[s],” instead arguing for different ways of valuing American literary texts.³ At the same time, scholars working within race and ethnic studies critiqued the whiteness of the canon, demanding a more complex understanding of difference and a broader literary tradition. The battle for control of the canon was not only occurring within scholar-

ship but was being waged within the classroom. Scholars recognized that “the problem of the canon is a problem of syllabus and curriculum, the institutional forms by which works are preserved as *great* works.”⁴ Henry Louis Gates Jr. acknowledges, “the teaching of literature is the teaching of values; not inherently, no, but contingently, yes; it is—it has become—the teaching of an aesthetic and political order, in which no women or people of color were ever able to discover the reflection or representation of their images, or hear the resonances of their cultural voices.”⁵ The classroom, then, was a contested space in which instructional choices had interplay with scholarly representations of American literature.

The anthologies that shaped “American literature” during this period remained, to some engaged in the debate over the canon, limited, and instructors turned often to digital texts to resolve the limitations of print. With access to the internet and basic HTML markup skills, scholars could create texts for classroom use, reimagining what and who belonged within American literature. For example, Mitsuoharu Matsuoka’s *American Authors on the Web*, one of many “curated hyperlinked” sites, includes an extensive and broad list of American authors.⁶ In the 1997 version of the project, Matsuoka compiled a list of 572 authors organized by birth and death dates and then subdivided his entries into chronological periods. The list resembles the table of contents of an anthology, yet an open-access and expansive anthology. In fact, Matsuoka’s 1997 list of 572 American authors is far more diverse and expansive than that of the contemporary *Norton Anthology of American Literature* (1998), which included only 259 authors. Matsuoka’s site also emphasized genres and authors not represented by the 1998 *Norton* such as children’s literature author Susan Coolidge and Lizette Woodworth Reese, a prominent Baltimore poet championed by H. L. Mencken and often compared to Emily Dickinson. Like many scholars of the period, Matsuoka’s project extended the limited American literature canon found in print anthologies.

Such projects form a crucial part of the history of Americanist digital pedagogical practice and foreshadow current digital practices. Curated hyperlinked projects were forerunners of contemporary crowdsourced digital projects. Matsuoka was only able to include works to which he could link, leaving more than half of his listed authors awaiting content. The quality of the texts was variable as well. Some were drawn from scholarly projects, others from Project Gutenberg, others from *The SUNET Archive* (Swedish University Computer Network), and still others from a hodgepodge of disparate sources.⁷ The linked texts did not necessarily meet the standards of what we expect to find in a scholarly edition or even in a published anthology and were produced in a variety of ways, including the large-scale digitization of texts by etext centers, libraries, and consortiums and “small scale recovery efforts nurtured by an

individual scholar who wanted to bring lost texts to scholarly and public attention,” what I label *DIY activist projects*.⁸

The DIY activist projects played an important role in the shaping of an American literature canon as scholars began their digital work to correct what they believed to be missing in print anthologies.⁹ For Donna M. Campbell, the lack of contextual social and historical information in the print anthology spurred the 1997 launch of the *American Literature* site.¹⁰ Campbell wrote and digitized support materials, such as a definition of Calvinism in New England Puritan culture, timelines, bibliographies, and primary texts.

In an interview, Campbell calls the project a “political statement” that brought scholarly materials to a broad audience and published texts left out of anthologies.¹¹ For example, Campbell transcribed Maria Cristina Mená’s “The Vine-Leaf” from its original publication in *The Century Magazine*.¹² The short story has since been anthologized, but Campbell’s edition was the first to be republished and remains the only freely available version on the web. The important work conducted by Campbell and others was squarely positioned within a movement to rethink and expand the American literature canon, and scholars like Campbell saw the classroom as an important site in which to reform ideas about American literature.

So pervasive was the impulse to use the digital to expand American literature that scholarly organizations developed resources to encourage the creation and use of digital materials. The now defunct *American Studies Electronic Crossroads* website, a project of Randall Bass at Georgetown University, was heavily invested in supporting classroom applications related to such work.¹³ Of the four sections of the website, two were dedicated to teaching: “Curriculum” and “Technology & Learning.”

Bass’s essay, “A Brief Guide to Interactive Multimedia and the Study of the United States,” argues for the centrality of multimedia tools within the classroom:

One of the most rapidly changing and exciting areas of education in the world today is the development of computer-based teaching materials, especially interactive multimedia programs that run on personal computers. These new technologies offer students and teachers access to materials as never before.¹⁴

To support classroom use, the site includes a remarkable number of resources for instructors including the “Directory of Dynamic Syllabi and Courses Online,” pedagogical essays, and support materials from workshops including the “Crossroads Faculty Research and Study Project” and the “Technology & Learning Crossroads Workshop.” These materials promote a broader view of American Studies, inclusive and interdisciplinary, and the site encourages instructors to develop pedagogical programs that would spread the word.

We might situate our current practice within this history, connecting our digital pedagogy to continued interrogations of the American literature canon. By doing so, we are positioning our work within a long tradition of Americanists dedicated to a teaching practice that shapes the field. While the canon doesn't attain the same critical attention as it did in the 1970s and 1980s, there are continual movements and reshaping occurring. My current work on American literature anthologies shows that authors continue to drop in and out of anthologies and, subsequently, classrooms. An analysis of the run of eight editions of the *Norton American Literature Anthology* reveals that anthologies have grown longer, but authors, texts, and even entire genres diminish and disappear over time as other texts and genres enter. For example, Paul Lawrence Dunbar, an African American poet commonly anthologized in the first half of the twentieth century, disappeared from anthologies during the canon wars, only to reappear in the 2007 and 2012 *Norton* anthologies. Other authors have been lost from the anthology over time, such as Norman Mailer, who was included in the 1979, 1985, 1989, and 1994 anthologies only to disappear from more current versions. To aid students in understanding an evolving concept of *American literature* and to encourage them to participate in discussions about canon formation, various approaches might be adopted, but digital pedagogies are particularly useful. Here I draw on research about educational practices within studio spaces, particularly design or library informatics studios. A well-developed mode of practice, "studio-based learning is rooted in the apprentice model of learning in which students study with master designers or artists to develop their craft. It emphasizes learning by doing, often through community-based design problems and is an integral pedagogy in architecture, urban planning and fine and applied arts."¹⁵

In my undergraduate courses, I have successfully used a blended model of the discussion class and the studio project. Such an approach is similar to the kaleidoscope pedagogy outlined in this volume's article titled "Kaleidoscopic Pedagogy in the Classroom Laboratory" by Ryan Cordell, Benjamin J. Doyle, and Elizabeth Hopwood (see chapter 1), which "adds building and experimentation to reading and interpretation, blends digital and analog media as tools and objects of our analyses, and repositions students as necessary and integral collaborators in the knowledge-making processes of the field." I teach a 300-level African American literature survey course, beginnings to 1930, which has a predominant population of non-English majors who take the class to meet core curriculum requirements (see Appendix 13.1 for the syllabus). As part of the course, we discuss the evolution of African American literature and how such literature is characterized, whether through time periods, genres, or themes. It is important for students to understand that the texts that they are reading are selected by editors and that each editor brings certain selection

standards to the task. In their preface to the second edition of *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay make plain that the editing of the anthology is a political act, "to make available in one representative anthology the major texts in the tradition and to construct a canon inductively, text by text, period by period, rather than deductively" and that the anthology will "give full voice to the key tropes and topoi that repeat—are echoed and riffed and signified upon—so strikingly across the African American literary tradition, thereby allowing formal linkages to be foregrounded in the classroom."¹⁶ As Gates and McKay suggest, the choices made, whether in an anthology or in a syllabus, define the literature, the period, and the object of study, in a particular manner. The incorporation of digital pedagogy projects in the classroom that force students to select and curate primary materials is useful in teaching students that selection, editing, and collection are at play in every anthology and every canon.

In my class, students work with a digital archive project focused on a local race riot. The Millican "riot" occurred in 1868 in Millican, Texas, a small town on the Houston and Texas Central Railway. This was a troubled time in central Texas. Millican had been ravaged by yellow fever, a severe crop failure, and the railway's expansion north to Bryan, Texas, all of which diminished the Millican population. The black community was registering to vote at a rapid pace; blacks were elected to the Constitutional Convention, and all the local white politicians except the coroner had been removed from office and replaced by Republican unionists.¹⁷ In June 1868 the Ku Klux Klan marched through Millican. Local blacks, participating in a church service led by Pastor George Brooks, a Methodist preacher and Union League organizer, led the parishioners into an armed attack on the Klan members, who promptly fled. This event started days of confrontations. By the third day, the local authorities called for a militia to be formed in Bryan and sent by train to put down the "mob." Newspapers describe the militia as being taken from the bars and brothels in the middle of the day. In the end an unknown number of black townspeople were injured and dead, including George Brooks, who was viciously beaten, mutilated, and lynched. The event was covered by newspapers from France to Panama, Edinburgh to San Francisco, and Hamburg to New York, suggesting the interest in and importance of the Millican confrontation.

Crucial to the incorporation of a digital project in the classroom is a careful match of subject to classroom materials. Course content and materials must lead to the digital project rather than the reverse. To understand the literature, students must grapple with the social, political, and historical context for the writing we examine, and a hands-on project where they sift through contemporary materials helps to illuminate the literature that they are reading. Much of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century literature that we

read emphasizes African Americans' responses to white violence. Literature, such as Charles Chesnut's *The Marrow of Tradition*, Ida B. Wells-Barnett's *The Red Record*, Pauline Hopkins's "As the Lord Lives, He Is One of Our Mother's Children," Claude McKay's "If We Must Die," films, such as *The Birth of the Nation*, and other visual and textual materials are considered within the context of student research and collection of Millican materials (for the full reading list, see Appendix 13.1). As students read this material they spend part of their week locating contemporary newspapers, political documents, and images. Instead of the instructor telling students about the contemporary resistance to voting rights, they read the editorials decrying voting rights or find news reports of lynchings that are directed against blacks who register to vote. The engagement with multiple forms of texts allows students, as Wesley Raabe explains, "to examine texts that have been domesticated for literary anthologies and editions, to enliven the classroom with alternate texts that show literary works to be more unruly than anthology publication forms may suggest."¹⁸

The contextualization of historical events in connection to creative production is reinforced by the course assignments. Students are responsible for researching the Millican riot, locating, editing, and curating primary materials related to the event, and repositing their items with Dublin Core metadata and a transcription in our course Omeka site.¹⁹ In effect, students work together to build an open-source digital archive that collects materials related to the Millican riot. To support student learning, the project is stair-stepped across the semester with weekly lab days in which we work on pieces of the project. Lab days walk students through the project, teaching them basic research skills, copyright considerations, how to understand and construct metadata, and how to create entries in Omeka. I have written small assignments that build to our final project and teach important research, analysis, and writing skills. We begin by learning how to locate and select materials (see Appendix 13.2). To ensure that students navigate the complexities of digital databases and collections, they produce a research strategy, a paper that maps their research question and possible ways to locate information on that question, for my feedback. To facilitate students' historical and cultural understanding of not only the riot we are documenting but also the experiences to which African American writers are responding, students complete an assignment designed to contextualize the events they are exploring. Locating mentions of Millican in historical newspapers, students read the surrounding articles, research the politics of the newspaper in which Millican is reported, and write a short response paper analyzing the way in which such details inform the response to Millican. Students report that this assignment allows them to better understand what the writers they are reading are living with, responding to, and critiquing. As students conduct their research, they produce an anno-

tated bibliography of primary and secondary materials, again allowing me to provide feedback during this crucial stage of the process (see Appendix 13.3). A visiting metadata librarian teaches students how to create the Dublin Core metadata necessary for their Omeka upload, and students add their materials to our class website (see Appendix 13.4). Finally, students write a traditional research paper based on their selected topic related to course readings using the historical and cultural materials located in the Omeka class website (see Appendix 13.5).

Further, students come to understand how lenses form the way that we view texts. African American literature scholars have recently argued for a recasting of literature written from Reconstruction through the end of the First World War. In a time period often characterized as "The Dark Ages of Recent American History" or "The Decades of Disappointment," literature of the period paired with an investigation of the Millican incident reveals another narrative, a narrative of resistance.²⁰ Or, as Gebhard and McCaskill note, "Focusing exclusively on black victimization and de facto slavery gives us an incomplete picture of these critical years in America's history. In these decades, African Americans sustained and strengthened the vocal press and bedrock spiritual institutions they had organized during slavery, built new educational institutions, and created networks of political and social leadership to resist both the illegal and legal violence aimed at keeping them from full and equal participation in the nation's life."²¹ While we might tell students that African American writers used literature as a political tool, they better understand its usage when they are immersed within period materials. Students come to understand how a body of knowledge about an event is shaped and misshaped. They begin to see the discrepancies in news stories, realize that the census did not record the names of slaves in Texas, and that newspaper accounts often didn't name black participants while using the full names of whites.

Teaching students to conduct digital research necessarily engages them in these political questions. In the essay "Less False Stories: Teaching Comparative Early American Literatures," Pattie Cowell argues that the classroom is a place in which we might focus on questions: "We ask what questions reveal about questioners, and whose questions these are anyway. We ask why some regions and groups have become the subject of extensive contemporary scrutiny and others have been neglected, why, for instance, we know so much of colonial New England and so little of the even earlier Spanish southwest settlements."²² I add to these questions: What is an American text? And how do we understand literature's role in the formation of nationhood? Such questions center the current debates in American literature within the context of our turn toward hemispheric studies, continued explorations of nationhood, race,

gender, class, and sexuality. Such questions help guide students to understand how canons are created. Amanda Gailey points to the use of digital approaches to emphasize the complex formations of American literature, noting,

students tend to think of literature as a fixed field in which all the important decisions about what is included and what is excluded have already been made, usually on principled and objective grounds, by experts in the past. They sometimes know that the canon has undergone changes, mostly in response to the progressive movements of their parents' or grandparents' generation, but the work of deciding what is important or beautiful seems to strike them as now complete.²³

At some point in the semester, a student will ask if a certain primary document might "count" for the assignment. This question will lead to a discussion about the purpose of the archive and what is in and what is out. As Leslie Bonds has noted, authentic learning through digital pedagogical applications forces students to deal with questions with which scholars might engage, in this case questions of inclusion and exclusion—of canon formation.²⁴ By grappling with these questions, students learn just how difficult such questions are to resolve. Further, the lack of firm answers sets up an opportunity for joint exploration. Paul Fyfe calls this "a terrific opportunity to join students in shared projects of inquiry and explore new aspects of the discipline."²⁵ It is also a moment to circle back to the basic question of what American literature is and how we define it.

Ultimately, an Americanist digital pedagogy is engaged with the same crucial questions that American literature scholars ask: What counts as American literature? What are the crucial questions that we must engage? The incorporation of digital projects focused on canon formation allow us to extend and deepen the questions that we have traditionally raised in the classroom. The self-referential creation and use of digital materials, especially those that extend the American canon, place the instructor within the long history of those who have practiced Americanist digital pedagogies, and it reengages students with crucial issues in the field.

The appendixes for this chapter, a syllabus and assignments for a course by Amy E. Earhart on African American literature from the early Americas to 1930, can be found at www.press.uillinois.edu/books/TeachingWithDH.

Notes

1. See Brett D. Hirsch, ed., *Digital Humanities Pedagogy: Practices, Principles and Politics* (Cambridge: Open Book, 2012); Ann Hawkins, ed. "Special Issue: Digital Humanities Pedagogy," *CEA Critic*, 76, no. 2 (2014); Diane Jakacki, "Digital Pedagogy: Select Readings," *Diane Jakacki* (blog), <http://dianejakacki.net/digital-pedagogy-select-readings/>.

2. Amy E. Earhart, *Traces of the Old, Uses of the New: The Emergence of Digital Literary Studies*, Digital Culture Books (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015).

3. Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790–1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 5.

4. John Guillory, "Canon," in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, ed. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 240.

5. Henry Louis Gates Jr., "The Master's Pieces," in *The Henry Louis Gates, Jr. Reader*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Abby Wolf (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2012), 163.

6. Earhart, *Traces of the Old*, 99. Mitsuharu Matsuoka's project remains in effect today; for the 1997 version, see *American Authors on the Web*, updated January 7, 1997, archived on the Internet Archive, accessed March 3, 2016, <https://web.archive.org/web/19970109020526/http://www.lang.nagoya-u.ac.jp/~matsuoka/AmeLit.html#Authors>.

7. Peter Shillingsburg, for example, calls *Project Gutenberg* "the product of abysmal ignorance of the textual condition" and a "textual junkyard." Peter Shillingsburg, *Scholarly Editing in the Computer Age: Theory and Practice* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press), 161.

8. Amy E. Earhart, "Can Information Be Unfettered?: Race and the New Digital Humanities Canon," in *Debates in Digital Humanities*, ed. Matthew K. Gold (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 313, <http://dhdebates.gc.cuny.edu/debates/>.

9. Donna Campbell, "Brief Timeline of American Literature and Events: Pre-1620–1920," *American Literature*, archived on the Internet Archive, accessed March 4, 2016, <https://web.archive.org/web/20050929191902/http://www.wsu.edu/%7Ecampbelld/amlit/timefram.html>.

10. Donna Campbell, phone interview with author, September 2, 2011.

11. Campbell, interview, September 2, 2011.

12. Campbell, interview, September 2, 2011.

13. *The American Studies Crossroads* site is no longer being actively updated. The site materials are unevenly archived on the original Georgetown site and on the Virtual Knowledge project site, making the Internet Archive the most complete archive available.

14. Randall Bass, "A Brief Guide to Interactive Multimedia and the Study of the United States," Georgetown University, last updated 1997, archived on the Internet Archive, accessed on March 2, 2016, <https://web.archive.org/web/19970614171001/http://www.georgetown.edu/crossroads/mltmedia.html>.

15. Martin Wolske, Colin Rhinesmith, and Beth Kumar, "Community Informatics Studio: Designing Experiential Learning to Support Teaching, Research, and Practice," *Journal of Education for Library & Information Science* 55, no. 2 (2014): 168.

16. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay, preface to the 2nd ed. of *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), 184.

17. Cynthia Skove Nevels, *Lynching to Belong* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2007), 19.

18. Wesley Raabe, "Estranging Anthology Texts of American Literature: Digital Humanities Resources for Harriet Beecher Stowe, Walt Whitman, and Emily Dickinson," *CEA Critic* 76, no. 2 (July 2014): 170–171.

19. Amy E. Earhart, ed., *Millican "Riot," 1868*, accessed March 3, 2016, <http://millican.omeka.net>.

20. Caroline Gebhard and Barbara McCaskill, *Post-Bellum, Pre-Harlem: African American Literature and Culture, 1877-1919* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 1.

21. *Ibid.*, 2.

22. Pattie Cowell, "Less False Stories: Teaching Comparative Early American Literatures," *Early American Literature* 33, no. 1 (1998): 89.

23. Amanda Gailey, "Teaching Attentive Reading and Motivated Writing through Digital Editing," *CEA Critic* 76, no. 2 (July 2014): 196.

24. Leslie Bonds, "Listening In on the Conversations: An Overview of Digital Humanities Pedagogy," *CEA Critic* 76, no. 2 (July 2014): 153.

25. Paul Fyfe, "How to Not Read a Victorian Novel," *Journal of Victorian Culture* 16, no. 1 (2011): 85.