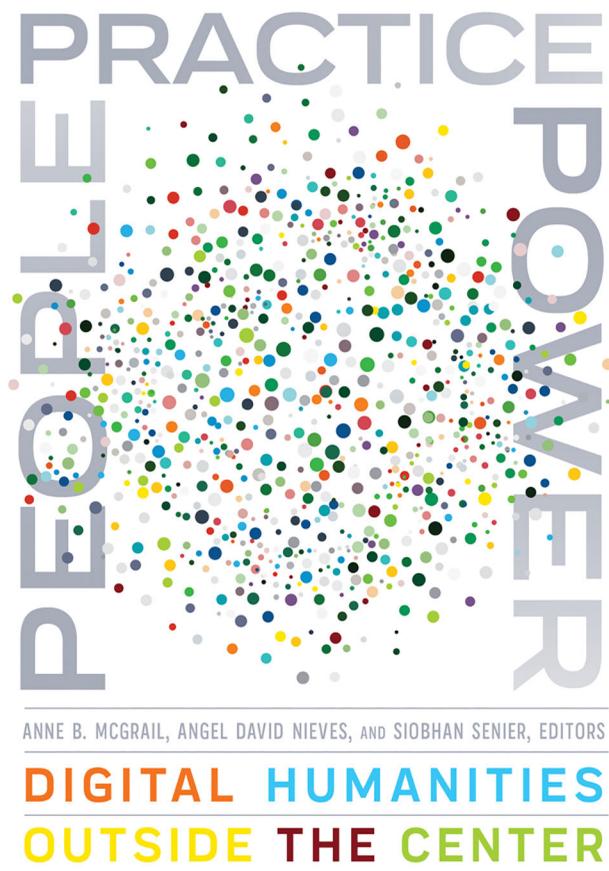MICHAEL J. KRAMER

Book Review: *People, Practice, Power: Digital Humanities Outside the Center*

People, Practice, Power: Digital Humanities Outside the Center. Ed. Anne B. McGrail, Angel David Nieves, and Siobhan Senier. University of Minnesota Press, 2021. 360 pp. /$142.00 (hb) ISBN 1517910676, $32.95 (sb) ISBN 1517910684.

Roughly a decade ago, the academic world was abuzz with the revolutionary possibilities of applying digital and computational approaches to humanities topics. What has happened since then? A new essay collection edited by Anne B. McGrail, Angel David Nieves, and Siobhan Senier, part of the "Debates in the Digital Humanities" series published by the University of Minnesota Press, offers as good a place as any to take stock of the state of the field. That is, if we can even call digital humanities (DH) a field. The question of whether what we are investigating is a distinct discipline or if digital humanities as a practice remains interdisciplinary and interstitial continues to be unclear. After all, the humanities are already multifaceted. Adding "digital" makes things even more confusing. We cannot even decide on what verb form to use. Some write "digital humanities *is* a field"; others insist "digital humanities *are* a set of approaches." Some cling to the alluring possibilities and potential of connecting digital computation to humanities topics; others mostly just want the term to go away. Some continue to see digital humanities as a way to level hierarchies and make social change from within—and even beyond—the academy; others still claim that digital humanities has a "dark side," or believe it to be the most sinister thing since C. P. Snow's "two cultures" of science and the humanities.

The contributors to *People, Practice, Power* all continue to be interested in the utopian potential of digital humanities, but they also seem chastened by the failure of DH to live up to the hype. No essays call for abandoning the term, nor do any of the authors reject the idea of figuring out how to best use computers in the humanities, yet to a person the authors all notice how much digital humanities has fallen short of early goals to revolutionize the academy or the larger world. Many contributors still put faith in digital humanities as a mechanism for addressing inequality and other myriad problems, but they also bemoan DH's shortcomings. The essay collection thus serves as a sobering report on the field. Small breakthroughs have occurred, as essayists note in their case studies and reports on local institutional situations, but these are largely overshadowed by issues of institutional precarity, administrative gold rushes of investment that then quickly dried up, and continued dilemmas of political import, most of all whether digital humanities can recenter marginalized voices in and beyond the academy. Whether it is librarians treated unequally compared to faculty; or adjunct and non-tenure track faculty lacking the security and power of tenured colleagues; or the humanities itself dismissed as a core part of the academy; or less affluent universities and colleges unable to marshal the resources that flow easily to elite institutions; or people excluded or mistreated due to race, gender, ethnicity, class, or sexual orientation, the practice of digital humanities has not been able to transform power relations in or beyond academia in any fundamental or radical way. The party's over; the revolution did not yet happen. Moreover, digital humanities' emergence alongside the adjunctification, managerialization, corporatization, and defunding of the university, not to mention renewed right-wing attacks on institutions of higher education over the last few years, raises questions about what digital humanities has been as a phenomenon and where DH might be headed.

People, Practice, Power does not bring good news for the most part; the book does, however, make an important theoretical intervention in digital humanities by focusing

on the concept of infrastructure. The term (or something closely related to it) appears in almost every essay. We learn of the book's goal to "humanize infrastructures" in the introduction by the editors (more on that in a moment); there is "epistemic infrastructure" (James Malazita); the infrastructures of private companies seeking to profit as so-called EdTech (Erin Rose Glass); labs as infrastructures (Taylor Arnold and Lauren Tilton; Urszula Pawlicka-Deger); "zombie" infrastructures in both the literal and the metaphorical library "stacks" (Laura R. Braunstein and Michelle R. Warren); the failed infrastructure of curated directories of digital tools and projects (Quinn Dombrowski); experimental humanities infrastructures (Maria Sachiko Cecire and Susan Merriam); intersectional infrastructures (Christina Boyles); "little DH" infrastructures (Kelsey Corlett-Rivera, Nathan H. Dize, Abby R. Broughton, and Brittany de Gail); nodes as infrastructure (Brennan Collins and Dylan Ruediger); failed collaborative infrastructures (Elizabeth Rodrigues and Rachel Schnepper); "expanded infrastructures" and (by way of the ideas of Patrick Svensson) "conceptual cyberinfrastructures" such as hacks by people of color and global activists (Eduard Arriaga); there are "infrastructural imaginaries" (Lisa Parks by way of Pamela R. Lach and Jessica Pressman); equitable, inclusive infrastructures (Ashley Sanders Garcia, Lydia Bello, Madelynn Dickerson, and Margaret Hogarth); new web-based e-portfolio infrastructures for tenure and promotion dossiers (Jana Remy); "microbenefaction" infrastructures for adjunct DH faculty (Kathi Inman Berens); "shadow infrastructures" (Margaret Simon); "student-centric" infrastructures (Chelsea Miya, Laura Gerlitz, Kaitlyn Grant, Maryse Ndilu Kiese, Mengchi Sun, and Christina Boyles); "alternative understandings of access to infrastructure" for first-generation college students (Jamila Moore Pewu and Anelise Hanson Shrout); the stewarding of infrastructures at less affluent regional universities through minimal computing and other tactics (Roopika Risam); and "differential infrastructures" that might bring together digital humanities and critical university studies in provocative ways (Matthew Applegate). This wide-ranging exploration of infrastructure in *People, Practice, Power* brings the most optimistic futurisms that dominated digital humanities back to earth. Who gets to decide the allocation of resources in the academy and beyond its campuses? What even exactly counts as infrastructure? These are the overarching questions raised by the book.

People, Practice, Power also wants to take us "outside the center." It is a punning subtitle that proposes we move past the fancy digital humanities centers of the most elite schools and simultaneously that we shift our attention to the margins of academic life and society as a whole. Yet, taking us "outside the center," *People, Practice, Power* insists we also make shared infrastructural issues central. Sometimes the book seems to want to have its outsider lack of cake and eat it too. Authors critique the exclusion of their labor and ideas from their universities as if they were peripherals to the core processing unit of their institutions; yet they continue to invest hope in imagining that, if we can just get the infrastructural problem right, they can be incorporated into the heart of things while also still retaining their outsider status.

The idea that infrastructure is at the crux of all things DH has long been at stake in digital humanities. The editors and contributors of *People, Practice, Power* look back to

founding digital humanities theoreticians such as Alan Liu, who adventurously contended in 2016 that "the word 'infrastructure' can now give us the same kind of general purchase on social complexity that Stuart Hall, Raymond Williams, and others sought when they reached for their all-purpose word, 'culture.'"[1] For Liu, infrastructure has become "that cyborg being whose making, working, disciplining, performance, gender formation, and hybridity are increasingly part of the core identity of late modern culture."[2] The editors of *People, Practice, Power* concur. However, they write that the contributors to their collection "call attention to the ineluctably human side of DH infrastructure" and they demand that we examine "infrastructure in *human* terms" (x). To McGrail, Nieves, and Senier, this is "perhaps one of the more radical things that DH can do" (x).

Liu's contention, however, is perhaps more radical, or we might say more unnerving: not merely that digital infrastructure needs to concentrate more clearly on the humans involved in its maintenance, but rather that the human and nonhuman are blending together in some kind of new cyborgian entanglement. The implication of Liu's argument is that human actors and digital technologies are taking on new kinds of integrated, grafted, resoldered, and rewired qualities. A few of the contributors to *People, Practice, Power*, such as Malazita, directly critique Liu's thesis. Liu has written that infrastructure in the digital age is "the social-cum-technological milieu that at once enables the fulfillment of human experience and enforces constraints on that experience."[3] Against this position, Malazita contends instead that infrastructures "operate epistemologically, as 'machines of knowledge,' to *produce* those users themselves" (10). We think we are using machines to practice digital humanities; in fact, Malazita proposes that whether it is in learning management systems for teaching or computational tactics for analyzing texts or digital publishing platforms for public projects, they are using us.

Either way, some kind of cyborgian relationship is emerging when we investigate digital humanities infrastructurally. Braunstein and Warren pick up on a point in their essay about metaphorical "Zombies in the Library Stacks" when they note the ambiguous etymology of the term "infrastructure" itself, which means "standing between" (*inter* [between] + *sistere* [to stand]). We do "stand between" many forces currently in digital humanities, whether it is the two terms themselves, "digital" and "humanities," or between different parts of the university such as the library and the faculty office, or between the academy and the wider world, or between older notions of so-called "knowledge production" and newer modes of study, interpretation, and learning. As Braunstein and Warren evocatively indicate, while the "stacks," meaning the metal or wood bookshelves in libraries, increasingly give way to digital networking spaces, we still speak of activities "deeper in the stack" of digital infrastructures. These begin with computer hardware (and the human labor invested in creating and manufacturing it)

1. Alan Liu, "Draft for *Against the Cultural Singularity* (book in progress)," *Alan Liu website,* May 2, 2016, https://liu.english.ucsb.edu/drafts-for-against-the-cultural-singularity-book-in-progress.

2. Liu, "Draft."

3. Liu, "Draft."

and work their way up through operating systems, software design, platforms, integrations, interfaces, content, interaction, and user experiences. The old-school stacks behind the wooden circulation desk in the library are now a zombie concept; yet as such they, like so much else from the past, continue to haunt the infrastructures of the digital. Rightly, Braunstein and Warren note that zombies have a power to remind us of our in-betweenness, of what we might be gaining, but also what we are losing as we shift (or are forcefully shifted) through technological ruptures.

The ruptures can be confusing. Are they percolating on the margins, "outside the center," or are they rippling out from the core of power? Is digital humanities an insurgent, democratic movement or is it the academic manifestation of a larger system of surveillance, control, and attack asserting itself in pursuit of profit and the consolidation of power? As the 2020s unfold, these remain key dilemmas in debates in the digital humanities (and in the books released through the Debates in Digital Humanities series). Yet the terrain itself might be changing. In the aftermath of Black Lives Matter, the #MeToo Movement, and other demands for a reckoning with existing hierarchies of American and even global life, elite institutions of higher education seem to be adjusting in ways both promising and curious. One could argue, based on recent patterns of resource allocation in digital humanities, from the hiring of faculty to the investment in support, that the very approaches and people first imagined at the margins of DH are increasingly moving to the center, sometimes quite literally establishing new institutes and programs at some of the most elite institutions of higher education in the United States. At Brown University, Dartmouth College, Penn State University, Johns Hopkins University, and countless other places, primary emphasis in DH is placed more and more on Black digital humanities, decolonializing DH, and other approaches that position themselves as outside the halls—the centers—of power. This is heartening, but it also raises even more questions. What will it mean for perspectives and methods defined in many respects as peripheral to move to the center (and the centers) of digital humanities? In other words, what happens when digital humanities efforts taking place "outside the center" become central? To be sure, these marginalized modes of study do not come close to dominating the larger university system beyond DH, but within digital studies, what was once at the edges is now increasingly the focal point. What this will mean for "people, practice, and power" in digital humanities remains to be seen. ▪

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