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Distant Gatherings: A Text-Case for Digital Manuscript Collaborations
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Manuscript Studies in the ~~Digital~~ Covid-19 Age
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All right so so thank you very much and
a special thanks to Lynn Ransom and
everyone at the Schoenberg institute
for all the hard work that's gone into
organizing this conference.
I'm going to start my talk, Distant
Gatherings: a text case for digital
manuscript collaborations" with a
slightly personal statement
that I know will resonate among many of
you all.
Very simply, I've missed seeing you all.
for reasons we all understand
our 2020 plans for projects for meetups
and face-to-face exchanges
have been eclipsed by this covid19
moment and have kept us from seeing each
other in the ways that we all rely upon
in the ways that nourish our scholarship
and our intellectual lives.
And yet as we've all discovered life
goes on and we have all
learned how to cope and maybe even to
flourish
within this unexpected moment.
what I'd like to suggest today is that
due to this very dramatic change in how
we're living our lives
and the expectation, expectations we
continue to bring to our scholarly work
we've begun to see this world
differently, to imagine ways of using our
skills as medievalists
that benefit from the digital tools we
have our display at our disposal
and our newfound proficiencies with them.
i came to this conclusion after making
two observations
first that the zoom only conferences

which have become our default
simply replicate older forms of
in-person interaction
without allowing us to profit from the
real benefits that face-to-face meetings
allow
this is why despite all the hard work
and effort that go into organizing these
events
there remains there remains this sense
of dissatisfaction when we all
individually turn away from our screens
at the end of a presentation
and go back to our lockdown lives we all
know that zoom fatigue
is real and yet secondly
it's not the medium that is the problem
only the way we've chosen to use it
we only need to recognize that people
still even in lockdown
willingly spend a lot of time
communicating online on twitter and
other social media platforms for example
to understand that there's some value to
be had in digital engagement
so how do we harness the power of
digital interactions
for scholarly work without sacrificing
the important exchange
that occurs in more traditional formats
the challenge in my mind is less to
build
new tools or structures to support the
distant gatherings we now attend
then to reconfigure what we currently
have
to capitalize on the unique
characteristics of the digital medium
and what are these characteristics
computer-enabled work relies upon its
own strengths
including the ability to disseminate
information efficiently
to collate and visualize data too great
for humans to manage on their own
to virtually bring together items that
are physically separate
and to manipulate and modify sources

without causing harm to the originals
distanced scholarship that relies upon
the online world
capitalizes on the very qualities we
have come to expect in our everyday
communicative practice.
It's dynamic, user driven, interconnected,
and responsive to visitors, all
characteristics
we should first identify and then use to
our advantage
when we undertake digital scholarship.
Now I have found that time-bound digital
events
that rely heavily on the dynamic quality
of virtual exchange,
that promote transparent and
public-facing communities,
and that circle around a circumscribed
set of questions or problems--
much like a facebook post that poses a
thorny question
and then elicits a lengthy response--
these have been very successful ways to
bring people together
to engage in online scholarship.
Now what does that mean in real life, how
does that work out?
Today I'll be profiling three different
manuscript-based projects
that have capitalized on the qualities
of online communication I've just
outlined
these include the defeat of translation
project the las fera and image du mon
transcription challenges
and the *pelerinage de damoiselle sapience*
transcription event
which Amy just mentioned, which is taking
place right now as we speak.
All three of these projects rely upon
the same basic workflow
but they unfold over different time
spans.
The pelerinage event, as we know, was
engineered as a three-day sprint
the transcription challenges are styled
as two-week efforts

and the Deiphira stretches over a longer period of time but still requires a relatively minimal weekly time commitment from project participants in all of these projects we began with a manuscript

or a set of manuscripts that had been digitized

so that the images are freely accessible to anyone

once we located the desired manuscripts for each of these projects

we loaded images into a transcription platform called from the page

so that everyone involved in the project could access the manuscript and type up a transcription

of the work directly in the transcription pane

now in transcribing or in the case of images describing what we see in the digitized copy

we scrutinize the copy of the medieval work we create our own 21st century version of that text

and we record our observations of the manuscript or the text along the way

once the transcription is complete we're then able to export it

export it in a text file and create any kind of final product that we would like

the tech part here is so easy as to be almost a non-issue which I think is an important part of what has made these projects effective

these then are the mechanics of these online projects

digitize manuscript to transcription platform to exported text to final product.

But of course the machines and digitized images are not doing

the scholarly work that needs to get done it's people who do that

we must also recruit and organize participants in the project

then provide the framework for how the work will proceed.

Naturally the framework for how the work
work gets done
varies according to the project
parameters
so I'm going to start then to talk a
little bit about the Deiphira
translation project
centered around the typ 422 manuscript
housed at harvard's houghton library
the different is a minor literary work
by the well-known humanist
author leon batisti alberti and it's
been identified as the first
dialogue on love in italian vernacular
literature so
um a work of of some consequence
the dialogue is about a woman named Deiphira and
the conversation takes place between
palimacro
the man who loves her and filarco his
interlocutor,
who claims to be wise in the ways of
love and especially of women but we're
all sort of doubtful
of that at this point. If you look
closely at the image on the frontice
piece of the houghton typ-422 manuscript
which I have reproduced here for you you
can see those three figures,
presumably the characters we meet in the
dialogue, um this is the
the Deiphira is the only text in the 36
folio manuscript
and it's written in a nice clear
humanist script.
So starting in April of this year a
group of nine scholars who I like to
call the Deiphira 9
began a collaborative project to
transcribe and translate the digitized
version of the manuscript.
The impetus for the project was largely
Selfish-
as the grip of lockdown tightened many
of us were feeling isolated
and we were looking for ways to connect
with other scholars to continue to
research and to share our expertise

so the Deiphira 9 decided to meet up using
the tools that the digital world now
offers us
zoom meetings and shared google docs a
wordpress website to collect our
materials
and you can see the address at the top
of the slide if you want to check it out.
and then the digitized-manuscript -to-
keyboard-text workflow that I just
outlined for you. As we have transcribed
and translated this work into English
we have come to enjoy and to really
capitalize on the digital environment
as we build our working community of
friends centered around this text.
We meet twice a week on zoom for an hour
each time first to do a very close
analysis of the manuscript
and the version of the text found in it
and then to produce an English language
translation and I'm pretty strict about
keeping it at just one hour
so people know what they're in for and
that the project is not burdensome.
During these meetings we've already
completed a full transcription of the
manuscript
and just this past week we completed the
first run through our English
translation our next steps will be to to
do another read through
and to normalize our translation but
these things will all be done
collaboratively which means we benefit
from everybody's expertise and
perspective.
In terms of the research products that
have come out of our efforts so far
we've put together a collation diagram
using Viscollm so thank you =Dot and
uh Alberto, we've isolated various hands
within the manuscript and the
corrections made to it
we've discovered that the typ422 is
actually extracted from a much larger
manuscript
and we've posted some of these findings

in a preliminary project at digital
mappa
that brings together the manuscript
images our transcription our translation
and the collation diagrams.
We hope then together all of these
materials into a digital site housed at
Georgetown university
and add a collation of our edition to
the standard print edition from the
1970s.
Our Georgetown hosted edition will also
include annotations
a manuscript recension and
supplementary essays on the text in our
methodology
and we hope to have this done in the
next six months or so.
Now the second project or rather group
of projects I'll talk about is a series
of two-week manuscript transcription
challenges
that Stanford rare books curator
Benjamin Albritton and I organized
and staged over this past summer and
fall.
To date there have been three of these
transcription challenges the first
featuring
multiple manuscript of excuse me
manuscripts of Goro Dati's
15th century geographic tree uh text
called la sfera
and the most recent which just finished
up on in October
treating the first half of the first
recession of Goussoin de Metz'
mid 13th century scientific treatise the
Image du Monde
all of that information there for you
Now the inspiration for the first
Challenge, a competition to transcribe
versions of Dati's work was the result
quite honestly of just just too much
time on twitter.
In the earlier days of lockdown in the
US Ben and I were lamenting our mutual
feelings once again of isolation

and we came up with this idea to connect
with other scholars
who might enjoy gathering around and
engaging with the text
through the act of transcribing it
collaboratively.
we identified La Sfera as a good
candidate since we could easily locate
locate digitized versions of the text at
Yale, the Arsenal inPparis
and the Vatican library. We loaded the
images of each of these versions into
Stanford libraries' instantiation of FromThePage
and then we created a quick wordpress
website where we collected all the
materials
that we would need for the challenge and
then set out the terms of the
competition.
We created team pages with links to the
transcription platform, a project log
and a link to the rules and guidelines
so everyone sort of knew
knew what they were up to. Through our
personal networks and the magic
of twitter we were able to build three
teams of 10 scholars each
Team USA, Equipe France, and Squadra Italia.
The rosters were filled and a group of
team captains put in place about a week
before the competition began
at which time each team would have two
weeks to complete their transcriptions
and submit them to the panel of three
judges they assessed each submission
according to speed
accuracy and collaborative participation.
And once this first competition began
officially
the work was really fast and furious.
Within about 24 hours of the start time
roughly half of the transcription work
had already been done and teams were
moving on to the review stage.
Ben and I along with many other
competitors we're constantly tweeting
updates
to track our progress or to highlight

what was discovered in our manuscripts
whether it was a strange writing style
or an unusual map
or even a party of dragons who were
hanging out
in a misidentified tower of babel. During
this first day of competition
that first 24 hours or so our tweets
attracted a lot of attention from art
historians
from librarians who had a copy of las
vera in their own repositories
to fellow medievalists who were just
interested in what were going on and
what was going on
and dh scholars who were really
intrigued by the competition
competition's framework. After the first
flush of excitement the teams began to
buckle down and engage in the
nitty-gritty of producing a clean
transcription
to submit to the judges.
Now to do this teams use several forms
of digital communication
including slack to really for inter-
team communication, twitter to really
speak more publicly, and then the
challenge team pages where members would
post observations some research and some
substantive
substantive findings
uh the first success The first event was
so successful and the demand for
a second phase was so strong that we
brought in five more copies of La Sfera
and ran a second transcription challenge
in late July meaning that at the end of
the second two week challenge
we had eight full transcriptions of this
text from eight different manuscripts.
Along the way our transcription work
inspired a deep engagement with the text
itself
on the part of our transcribers who
produced some amazing scholarship
like this blog post authored by team
captain Carrie Benes

comparing the different scripts across
the 8 manuscripts
and you can still read Carrie's small
essay on the team Vatican page of the
La Sfera website.
We've also cataloged and made public all
the data all the transcriptions created
during these events
so that other scholars can learn about
the challenges and use our
transcriptions in their own work.
Now one of the greatest points of pride
for me at least over the course of these
challenges
is that all told somewhere between 75
and 100 medievalists
have participated, each bringing his her
or their own expertise and enthusiasm to
the effort in their own ways
and I know a lot of transcribers are out
in the audience right now listening
and um it's been really gratifying to
see our community come together
through these projects and I hope that
other scholars will come forth who want
to adopt this model and propose
their own texts.
And speaking of other texts I'll just
take my last few minutes to talk about
the Pelerinage de Damoiselle Sapience
transcription event that's going on
as a part of the Schoenberg conference.
The task for the 30 event participants
just as we have mapped it out on the
event website is to transcribe the ten
folios of the Pelerinage de Damoiselle Sapience
a previously unedited work from UPenn's
ms 660, then to prepare a set of rules for
the transcription we make--
that's today's task --and then to create a
narrative section to introduce our
methodology and the work itself.
Our goal is to prepare all of these
scholarly products bring them together
into one document and then submit
our work to the *Digital Medievalist* for
possible publication in the journal
as one of their methods articles.

For this event we've chosen the metaphor
of the relay race and this is the spirit
that has been brought to the work since
yesterday morning.
We have three teams working together
passing the baton from one to the next.
Team transcription began the event by
transferring the text from the digital
images of UPenn's ms660
to the transcription pane and then
passing the baton off to team revision,
today's team who's now reviewing the
version created
by the first leg of the race and
creating their transcription statement
that sets out the rules.
Tomorrow team submission will take us
all the way to our finish line
of a fully transcribed text with a
transcription statement and a small
narrative
and how we got our work done.
Now in a relay race you watch your
teammates intently you support them and
encourage them when you can and you
build the strategy for your own
participation
based on what they accomplish so with
this ethos in mind we've been watching
intently what our teammates have been
doing as they complete their leg of the
race
cheering them on through channels like
twitter or facebook for example
and strategizing for our chance to take
the baton.
This event then is a test case for a
digital methodology
that brings together transcribers from
near and far as mapped on the Damoiselle Sapiance
participant
map and it's an experiment with
different ways that our workflow
might function on a very limited
timeline.
So to wrap up I think the elements that
make these events work so well
are the following there's really a

well-defined time period that allows
participants to know what they're
in for the easy tech allows for a very
low barrier
barrier of entry and I think they both
promote and rely upon
communication and community these are
all important aspects.
So where do we go next? um These projects
have tested the waters of our digital
scholarly practice
and they represent but one way to gather
together around manuscripts
while at a distance from the work and
from each other.
While virtual manuscript work will never
replace interacting with the material
objects that's for sure
we can enjoy these distant gatherings
for now
knowing that we're engaging in real
scholarly work even as we look to the
day that we can finally map
out new journeys to unite with these
materials and with each other.
Now I started with a personal statement
and I will end with one as well.
Like many medievalists who followed a
non-traditional career path
who could never displace themselves to
spend extended periods of time in the
archives
or take up visiting teaching positions i
found that the shift to online work
was really a comfortable one for me. In
fact I had already spent years learning how
to work at a distance when our lockdown
lives began.
Certainly postcovid scholarship will
look different than what has come before
as medievalists recover from this moment
and we are forced
to recalibrate our scholarly methods as.
I'm sure we will
I encourage the community to look
especially to those scholars
with non-traditional backgrounds who may
already have navigated

some of the challenge that will face
challenges that will face us
as we move beyond this pandemic moment.
And I'll stop there and thank you very
much for your attention.
Thank you very much. It's um I feel as
though we
have talked a lot about how we can use
digital methods to bring
scattered manuscripts together but it's
really heartening to hear about
using the tools to bring scattered
scholars
together um so now we will
take time for questions on this talk
I yeah we already have one question for
Laura
um federico botana do you want to ask
directly if you could uh turn your video
on
and I'll let you take it away yes done
thank you
um I have worked on La Sfera and uh
I had a lot of problems sort of working
with the printed printed
printed editions which I think is more
or less the the
early 1500s edition which was re-edited
in the 19th century and there's so much
difference in manuscripts it's still the
same text we can see where the errors
are and I think this
big need for digital for a critical
edition is
that with what you've been producing is
um
is that a possibility I think would be
much very helpful for everybody.
Well you know at this point we're kind
of taking the the approach that um
each manuscript is is its own product
and there's
there's an amazing joy um I think that
the participants felt in engaging so
deeply
with all these variations and then i
mean it's really great to be able to see
all eight of them up and see where

things don't match up and
um you know even the sort of adjustments
that the scribes were making right as
they were
um working through these you know
different variations and copying and so
we're just I mean it's such a huge
tradition
i think there are over 150 um extant
versions
um so it would be an enormous amount of
work if someone wanted to undertake it
and you and I should talk
um but um
yeah but for the moment it's more um you
know
giving sort of honoring those those
individual witnesses
um so but we'll see where the project
goes thanks yeah it would be great to
see I'd love to see it because I must
say I have to struggle a lot with some
of
sometimes it's a sound only that makes
um
things change but anyway I stopped there
thank you very much for watching
absolutely. uh
All right I see catherine chandler has a
question
hi yes um I pers participated in the
most recent
transcription project which was very
challenging and a lot of fun
um and so I'm I'm not sure if it's
important to have a critical
edition come out of the project
or what but um somebody who's more of a
liturgist
and somebody who works more with music
manuscripts um
is it possible that there might be a
project involving
liturgical texts or music texts
ones that involve more latin latin west
liturgical things um Thank you so much
and thanks for your participation I will
just tell you too

that the judges for the Image du Monde got
in touch with me last night and there is
um there is a decision so that will come
out very soon um
but in terms of what comes out and what
sort of challenges appear later
um what I really hope and I know um Ben
Albritton and I agree on this is that we
hope that people will take the model
and will run their own challenges
because frankly
it's a lot of fun but it's a lot of work
right and so
and you know to tell you the truth I've
learned so much
doing them about those particular texts
and so I think it's a really great way
both to
advertise the text that you're
interested in in the work that you've
done on it right
but also to you know bring that
expertise it's it's
I never could have imagined what people
you know
what they brought to the challenges it's
it was so amazing
um the work and the the genie, right that
people brought
so thanks it was great fun thank you so
much for all the hard work you do
it's a lot of fun
thank you are there other questions from
the audience if not
i have one and so uh I'll go ahead and
ask it and if anyone has another
question they can
write it in um I just kind of following
up on that
um and also the lovely visual
of the map with people all over the
world participating
um I wonder like how much you thought
about like how this pro this kind of
project might
scale up I'm not sure it needs to scale
up but
you know how do you make it larger how

do you make it how
not you but how does one make it larger
how does one make it more inclusive
um and what what would be the challenges
if there are any other than just the
fact that it's a lot of work for one
person to manage like are there
ever platforms to put this out on or
there probably are other platforms i
mean you know part of the reasons that
we use the tools that we did is because
they're
um almost universally accessible and you
know
people you know most everybody can get
onto a google doc
um so you know that we relied on on
those tools in that way
in terms of how might one might scale it
up um certainly you could do
more delegation um you know my role as
um the coordinator of these events um
particularly La Sfera and the Image du Monde
was really just to absorb any problems
that would come along and try to fix
those things and so
I'm sure if you were to have you know
three people doing that job
um that that could be done as well um
i mean I haven't really thought making
it bigger I you know I was I was
overwhelmed that
50 plus you know scholars were
participating in each of these things
it's
um it was great so sorry Lynn no I mean
i I mean I think it's fantastic I don't
mean to suggest that it needs to get
bigger or anything but it just seems
like such
it's such a good idea and you could
really just
get so much new data out there
right anyway well congratulations it's
it's been fun to watch
um okay so one person has another
question has come in
uh Sarah Savant you want to

sure I was actually asking sort of the
opposite question to you I think or
a slightly different question which is
how did you get started in the first
place and what is the
i mean it's quite a lot to get 50 people
i think and what is kind of the value
that you think
brought people to want to do this um you
know it strikes me a little bit like
hackathons
but um that people do in computer
science but what
you know what what motivates everyone
and people don't have time I mean
you know even in lockdown there's a lot
of people who are juggling
more not less. I got to tell you Sarah i
mean I i was
amazed that people would do this but you
know one of the things that I like to
to build into any of these um events
is a little bit of fear I mean I think
the competition thing
gets people going I mean we're all you
know polite people
but at the end of the day like we want
to win right and so um I think there's
that little bit that's that
that's in there and that's you know I i
built that into the
Damoiselle Sapience thing too like we need
to be done by Friday night
right and the challenge is how can you
know how can we do that so I think it's
the combination of that
little bit of sort of thrill fear um
and then the limited time span when you
say to somebody
listen, for the challenges, I would say,
listen if you're just doing
transcription ,if you're not a team
captain or anything like
five to six hours ,tops um you get to
interact with everybody you get to do
something that you really enjoy doing
and that maybe you know
your ten-year-old doesn't care about

who's sitting right
um and so it's five to six hours tops um
you get to be part of this team interact
with people and then two weeks we're
done like we're done
right and so I think that allows people
a little bit of joy in what they're
doing. A really strict project
timing like knowing and and being and
being loyal to that
okay and I love the competition idea
we all do we all do, yeah I know exactly
thank you