

# Exploring the borderlands. A revolutionary potential for DH

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Drawing on the legacies of its traditional humanistic domains of origin, the Digital Humanities have inherited many of their structures - despite the DH's self-understanding as "revolutionary". At our panel we want to approach the theme of the conference ("Collaboration as Opportunity", especially the call for "Revolutions": [https://dh2023.adho.org/?page\\_id=310](https://dh2023.adho.org/?page_id=310)) from an international, multimodal perspective, informed by the discourse about cultural criticism in DH.

We would like to interrogate areas in the 'borderlands' (Earhart 2018) of the field as areas where the DH still have the potential for revolutions. In our panel, we hope to shed light on blind spots in the DH such as monolingualism (Fiormonte 2021), a heritage of colonialism (Risam 2019) and gender imbalance (Gao et al. 2022, 330), to name but a few. These issues concern not only our research data, as Daniele Metilli illustrates on the example of borders and absences in Hans Sloane's collection, but also societal issues within the field itself, as Melissa Terras discusses: The DH's self-

perception as challenging power structures conflicts with the fact that the DH as field are part of the Academy and thus, inherit its structural problems such as precarious employment. Quinn Dombrowski presents the *Saving Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Online* (SUCHO) initiative in which volunteers assisted with web archiving Ukraine's cultural heritage sector and the balancing act involved, navigating between activism and listening to the needs of those affected. Dibyadyuti Roy and Domenico Fiormonte address the issue of broken promises with regard to the DH's revolutionary potential and disillusionment with regard to decolonising the field. Padmini Ray Murray explores how design can realise the DH's feminist and decolonial potential to democratise as well as promote real inclusivity and participation on a global scale.

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### SUCHO: A Case Study in Balancing Listening and Action

Ukraine, a country whose name means "the borderlands", became the site for a large-scale opportunity for collaboration — across linguistic, cultural, gender, and other boundaries — when Russia invaded in February 2022. While well-connected cultural heritage organizations established in the wake of WWII initiated their methodical processes for raising funds and reaching out to cultural heritage institutions to offer resources for protecting physical cultural heritage, a group of three digital humanists co-founded Saving Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Online (SUCHO), launching the project March 1st and immediately drawing in hundreds, then thousands of volunteers to assist with web archiving Ukraine's cultural heritage sector. Through the project, the organizers and volunteers have grappled with many of the issues raised by the panel, which this talk will reflect on. How much does it limit who we can communicate with among Ukrainian cultural heritage workers when none of the co-founders speak Ukrainian, and one has increasingly rusty Russian they would prefer to not use? How do we do this work while caring for young children? How do we balance staying out of the way of extremely busy and exhausted people on the ground, with understanding their needs and not making their job harder? How do we pivot a project that began with a specific technical focus to respond to what Ukrainians have asked for? How do we ensure there are many copies of the data without letting it become a scholar-usable archive of Ukraine when our goal is digital repatriation?

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### Tackling the issue of epistemic injustice in the DH

"Global South" is a controversial label that has been traditionally used in the realm of Social Sciences. Beyond colonization, exploitation and low income, in the context of DH, the Global South has been shaped by epistemic and material asymmetries, leading to invisibility as well as cultural and linguistic underrepresentation in major DH journals, conferences (Fiormonte 2021). The DH need to include regions that have also been previously underrepresented. Having been described by metaphors like the "big tent", "trading zone" and the like, the DH still haven't fully realized pluralism in geographical and geopolitical dimensions (Fiormonte et al. eds. 2022). The DH need to contribute to the repatriation of the historical epistemicide (the tradition of rival forms

of knowledge) committed by Western industrialized countries through their epistemic practices. Applied to DH, epistemicide refers to the way academic institutions, publishers, values, norms, traditions of thought, technologies, and standards have been used to render invisible the knowledge produced by communities of the epistemic South. This historical process of erasing epistemic plurality, now reinforced by AI large language models (Pozo et al. 2023), not only leads to epistemic injustice and inequalities, but to the loss of cultural diversity as a whole.

Projects like The Knowledge G.A.P. (<http://knowledgegap.org>), The Non Aligned Technology Movement (<https://nonaligned-tech.net/>), Lesan Translations (<https://lesan.ai/about.html>) or the Global Indigenous Data Alliance (<https://www.gida-global.org/>) are all examples of how social and scholarly and tech communities from different areas of the world are contributing to decolonize digital knowledge and fostering technodiversity (Hui 2023; Fiormente 2023). They also offer effective models that can be adapted and applied to different fields, including the Digital Humanities.

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#### **Beyond Data Borders: The Sloane Lab Experience**

“The Sloane Lab: Looking back to build future shared collections” is a “Towards a National Collection” (TaNC) discovery project that aims to digitally aggregate, reconstruct and recontextualise the fragmented collection of Sir Hans Sloane (1660–1753). Throughout his life, Sloane amassed a collection of over 70,000 objects from all over the world (Delbourgo, 2017). After Sloane’s death, the collection became the original nucleus of the British Museum, and was later dispersed across other institutions including the Natural History Museum and the British Library. The task of digitally reconstructing the Sloane collection poses many challenges (Ortolja-Baird et al. 2019), including those that stem from its colonial history (Guiliano / Heitman 2019). Throughout our work, we face several kinds of borders — institutional borders, documentary borders, disciplinary borders, copyright borders, technical borders, community borders. All of these borders can also be viewed as “data borders,” since they hinder a wide understanding and sharing of the knowledge contained in the datasets. To cross data borders, it is not enough to do the technical work of collecting heritage datasets and integrating them with each other. Datasets do not exist in a vacuum — each of them is influenced by specific worldviews, interpretations, and biases (D’Ignazio / Klein 2020). It is thus necessary to engage with data in a critical way (Smyth et al., 2020), from a plurality of perspectives (Risam 2018), and paying attention to what is absent (Ortolja-Baird / Nyhan 2022). To fully realise the potential of a DH project such as the Sloane Lab, we need to look outside and beyond data borders.

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Design mediates how we interact with the world, having both the power to democratize, but also to oppress and marginalize. Communities which are already marginalized are at risk to become even more marginalized in corporate online spaces which perpetuate epistemological violence against them through interfaces and infrastructures. The Design Beku collective (we design

with, not for, communities) explores how technology and design can be made decolonial, ethical and local by exploring the possibilities of collective data ownership to empower these communities, through the idea of feminist servers challenging the hegemonies of corporate technology (<https://designbeku.in/padmini-ray-murray/>). In a world where data is considered a precious commodity, how can we build and create digital social infrastructures which support marginalized communities and grassroots movements in creating, storing, sharing and most importantly owning their own data? The idea of the feminist server can be leveraged not only to decolonize data but also to challenge traditionally male-dominated monopoly over computer hardware (Murray et al. 2022).

This talk will not only approach the topic of decolonizing Digital Humanities on a broader scale but also look at aspects involved in this process beyond the Western world: it will emphasise that in a country like India, decolonizing is not enough — an anti-caste approach is vital as well (Murray 2018). These insights from a bird’s eye perspective of international DH as well as close-up looks at the needs of specific regions must all be incorporated in a vision of a digital “archive of the commons”, embodying the values of inclusivity and participation.

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#### **The Revolution will not be Digitized: Minority (Cultural) Viewpoints from Majority Worlds**

In 2012 the Malaysian spoken word artist Danny Mahes reinterpreted Gil Scott-Heron’s now iconic 1970 poem and song, “The Revolution will not be Televised,” as “The Revolution will not be Digitized” ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LdWFvaPE-jJ4&ab\\_channel=DannyMahes](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LdWFvaPE-jJ4&ab_channel=DannyMahes)): noting that the lack of ideological moorings in digital realms prevent the possibility of stable counter cultural critiques or any concomitant revolutionary resistance. Taking Mahes’ critique of the digital as a point of departure, which echoes contemporary scholarly disillusionments around the discipline of Digital Humanities, this talk will challenge the alleged nebulousness of Digital Humanities by interrogating the granular ontologies of DH communities in Global South/Majority World spaces.

Through locating ad-hoc online communities formed around DH in Majority Worlds as digital “borderlands,” I highlight the resistive possibilities of postcolonial digitality (Roy and Menon 2022). By implementing autoethnography as a methodology, I will leverage my positionality as one of the founding members of India’s first DH collective, *Digital Humanities Alliance for Research and Teaching Innovation* (DHARTI) and analyse my experience of coordinating DHARTI’s online presence during two major contemporary crises: the CAA-NRC protests ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Citizenship\\_Amendment\\_Act\\_protests](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Citizenship_Amendment_Act_protests)) in India between December 2019–January 2020, and the oxygen shortage for Covid patients during the second Covid wave in India in May 2021. Through juxtaposing the above case studies alongside theoretical interventions in cultural criticism I will highlight how minority cultures in Majority Worlds are locating DH pedagogy, practice, and research as emancipatory and embodying the possibilities of revolutionary digital communities of practice.

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### What makes us think we're better than this? Digital Humanities' troubled relationship with the Academy

Those working within the Digital Humanities often think of themselves as challenging data and power structures, and finding new mechanisms, approaches, and research areas in which to promote, interrogate, and share knowledge. Yet we mostly operate from within traditional academic institutions, and when scrutinized, our own field exhibits similar conservative power structures and behaviors to the rest of the Academy. Women do most of the emotional labor, and are crucial to building connections across the field, although there are far fewer employed in the discipline (Gao et al. 2022). Patterns of project funding lead to employment structures that encourage precarity within the field (Boyles et al 2018, Boyles and Petersen 2022). Hopes for new funding mechanisms and approaches, at a time when the Humanities' existence as an area is being threatened, puts us in an unwitting position of seeming to connect both the economic crisis facing the humanities to a neoliberal agenda (Chun et al 2016).

This paper will reflect on working for the past 25 years in academic posts which are now known as Digital Humanities, or DH adjacent. Using an auto-ethnography approach (Denshire 2014), it will reflect on the discussions regarding DH's issues that seem to keep repeating, and the techno-utopianism (Dickel and Schrape 2017) which also drives the field, and its activities, forward into areas of untapped innovation.

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