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Review of Making Things and Drawing Boundaries

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Jentery Sayers, ed. *Making Things and Drawing Boundaries: Experiments in the Digital Humanities*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017.

Making Things and Drawing Boundaries, in the series *Debates in the Digital Humanities*, comprises thirty-eight chapters including ten project snapshots (one-page project descriptions), and is divided into five parts: “Making and the Humanities”; “Made by Whom? For Whom?”; “Making as Inquiry”; “Making Spaces and Interfaces”; and “Making, Justice, Ethics.”

The book focuses on what “making” has to do with the digital humanities and who has to do all this making. I especially enjoyed part 4, “Making Spaces and Interfaces.” This part includes a broad representation of gender and ability, looking toward community organizing and integrating women’s history and traditionally feminized crafts into digital humanities work.

In “Making Queer Feminisms Matter: A Transdisciplinary Makerspace for the Rest of Us,” Melissa Rogers refers to Jamie “Skye” Bianco’s use of “digital humanities” instead of “the digital humanities” (or capital-letter DH) to expand “narrow definitions of ‘the digital’” (234). Because of this, I use “digital humanities” in this review instead of “DH.”

This book includes a number of examples of collaboratively created digital artifacts/tools/models, but it also has sections about digital artifacts and processes and created experiences like workshops and makerspaces. All are considered “digital humanities.” As such, this collection of essays finds itself asking and answering the biggest question that has plagued the digital humanities field since its beginning—What is the digital humanities?—but in a way that provides a more expansive and inclusive approach to asking and answering that question.

Jentery Sayers’s introduction leads with an example of the blurring of boundaries that exist among art, music, digital humanities, technical expertise, and gender studies by looking at Laurie Anderson’s music and commentary. Anderson, as a composer and musician, employs a metaphor of caregiving (“to give first aid”) to the technology she uses to produce her music. Sayers combines this traditionally feminine role of caregiving with the masculine connotations of technology; by doing so, he sets up the reader for a stroll through a world of digital humanities that has room for both.

Making Things and Drawing Boundaries engages many disciplines and ideas. For the purposes of this review, I concentrate on three themes that could easily be about the work of those in archive settings and may be particularly relevant to an archivist audience: labor, collaboration, and the artifacts being made or studied.

Theme: Labor

As an archivist, when reading a text such as this, I am looking for where the archivist is represented. Looking through the list of contributors to this volume, one sees professors, Ph.D. students, and researchers. There are also a few librarians, but archivists (named as such) seem to be missing. Archivists should be a part of the digital humanities discussion. Traditionally, the archivist’s role is a hidden one in the production of history, but the digital humanities, with its

focus on process, is a place where archivists' efforts can be a more seen, acknowledged, and critical part of scholarship creation.

Roxanne Shirazi's essay "Reproducing the Academy: Librarians and the Question of Service in the Digital Humanities" looks generally at trends of labor associated with women and specifically at the work done by librarians as an extension of that labor. Shirazi summarizes affective labor, feminized professions, emotion work, reproductive labor, and shadow labor, and states that the work librarians do in the academy is often categorized as service work. She calls for more support and value for a range of work and for a joining with other colleagues who experience similar dismissal of their contributions to the academy (91).

The chapter "Feminist Hackerspaces" by Amy Burek, Emily Alden Foster, Sarah Fox, and Daniela K. Rosner describes intersectional feminist hackerspaces that provide opportunities for women to learn technology and tools of the digital humanities. These groups remind me of women-centered groups that you might find meeting at a public library or senior center, albeit with a younger, hipper membership and more of a blend of craft and technology. The authors also emphasize that "since feminist spaces expand hacking to include crafting, making, and political and identity work, hacking becomes more than just tinkering with electronics—it is also an opportunity to look inward for means to build and maintain a sense of purpose" (227). To expand the digital humanities to include feminist intersectional makerspaces is hopefully a fruitful path forward for researchers and a way to encourage more women's interest in the digital humanities. Making digital humanities relevant to larger audiences is necessary for the field to diversify and include more voices and experiences.

One example of making the digital humanities relevant to wider audiences is the University of Virginia Scholars' Lab, which aims toward advocacy. Highlighted in the chapter "Making It Matter" by Jeremy Boggs, Jennifer Reed, and J. K. Purdom Lindblad, a project called Take Back the Archive puts some of the power of the archive in the hands of users, allowing people to contribute and help build the collection. It is a public history effort that aims to "preserve, visualize, and contextualize the history of rape and sexual violence at the University of Virginia, while honoring individual stories and documenting systemic issues and trends" (325). Asking people to volunteer traumatic experiences to a public archive is a difficult task, and acknowledging the labor involved by those contributing is important.

The term "invisible labor" is mentioned throughout the book. Two large issues with invisible labor are that (1) it is done by somebody else, and (2) one does not need to give credit or acknowledge that the work has been done at all. The work of librarians and archivists (and especially temporary library workers and non-"professional" library workers) is often invisible labor, but in the world of digital humanities, where processes are now a part of the scholarship, this labor should be acknowledged. Because the digital humanities often includes work like curation, digitization, programming, providing context for materials, and promotion, I find a blurring of the boundaries between the role of librarian or archivist and the digital humanist. I think it is natural for the boundaries between professions to blur as part of the shift from writing to making.

In P. P. Sneha's chapter, "Making Humanities in the Digital," the author points out that digital objects lack the fixity of traditional objects of study. She contends that "this flexibility not only

complicates how certain disciplines are understood, but also creates new challenges for the study of objects” (58). Citing Stephen Ramsay, an English professor and fellow at the Center for Digital Research in the Humanities at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, Sneha states that the lack of fixity leads to a shift “from reading and critiquing to building and making” (58).

Sneha discusses working with a large film archive (Indiaincine.ma) and a digital variorum (Bichitra). She writes about the making of the archive and variorum and acknowledges how labor-intensive the process of digitization and file management is. Archivists know that digitization is not a “simple matter” so it is validating to hear it said by others.

Further looking at how librarians and archivists fit into the digital humanities, the chapter “Creative Curating: The Digital Archive as Argument” by Joanne Bernadi and Nora Dimmock expounds on some of the requirements digital humanists have. This chapter explains that the library was needed to facilitate access to a physical collection, scan items, and provide a platform for a digital project, and to guarantee its long-term preservation. Facilitating access and preserving materials are the traditional roles of archives and libraries, and providing these services for digital or physical materials is quite similar in theory. It is beneficial to the humanist and the librarian/archivist to work together at the beginning of a digital humanities project. But the traditional librarian/archivist roles of collector, steward of materials, describer of materials, and gatekeeper to materials may be inverted so that power is shifted from the archivist to the researcher in new ways.

Theme: Collaboration

Janelle Jenstad and Joseph Takeda offer practical tips for revealing invisible labor in their essay, “Making the RA Matter: Pedagogy, Interface, and Practices.” From bell hooks’s *Teaching to Transgress*, the team implemented a liberatory pedagogy, a model of teaching that emphasizes students will learn more if they can connect new knowledge to their life experiences. This model also includes the understanding that students may not always accept the guidance of their teachers (72). In their essay, project director Jenstad and research assistant Takeda explore the evolution of collaboration that they have experienced and “emphasize the pedagogical potential of allowing the team to make itself in ways that work for the project and the personnel” (72).

This essay, more than any other in the book, had me wondering: What would this look like in an archives setting? In a processing or instruction unit? Who would this work best with—staff, students, interns, cross-department collaborations? And because working in archives is often a continuing learning experience, what would it look like if archivists took on a more explicit pedagogical outlook? As emphasized in the article, making space for the RA to thrive is more important than trying to make the RA conform to an idealized role.

Reducing power dynamics by working collaboratively is mentioned a few times in the book. Kim Marten, Beth Compton, and Ryan Hunt write about this distribution of expertise in their chapter, “Disrupting Dichotomies: Mobilizing Digital Humanities with the MakerBus.” They write, “A core ethos of the maker movement is to challenge traditional views of the expert, recognizing that everyone, from aerospace engineers to kindergartners, has skills to share. . . . Such expertise in amateurism results from dialogue with the maker community, gaining knowledge from sharing knowledge, and participating in iterative creative processes” (254).

How can the digital humanities reconcile the maker ethos with the practicality of the capitalist system we live in? John Hunter, Katherine Faull, and Diane Jakacki point this out in their essay, “Reifying the Maker as Humanist,” stating, “making cannot exist without an enormous superstructure of other, less well-paid activities” (132). One way around this that Hunter, Faull, and Jakacki explore is to make everything interdisciplinary, especially with feminist, queer, and critical race studies that emphasize inclusivity “to subvert the dominant paradigm of agency” (135). In a similar vein, the essay “All Technology Is Assistive” by Sara Hendren emphasizes a problem-solving and question-provoking type of work for the future. She ends her essay with the following sentiment: “Let us hope for objects that raise and suspend questions, and employ them alongside objects designed to solve problems. Then we can have a complex public conversation about needs and desires for interdependence—and about tools that provide assistance to every human body” (144).

Making Things and Drawing Boundaries includes many examples of specific tools and projects, but there is also reflection around what the impact those tools and projects will have and the ethics involved in making them. As Marten, Compton, and Hunt point out, “More technology is not necessarily better; how resources are used matters most” (253).

Theme: What Are We Studying? What Are We Making?

Sayers’s introductory remarks about Laurie Anderson’s work is a perfect example of the change in the type of cultural artifacts being studied. It is not just the textual part of the song (lyrics) but rather how the song was made and the relationship the artist had to the technology involved. In his analysis of the Anderson example, Sayers demonstrates how digital humanists can become the maker, can be Anderson with a caregiver’s attitude toward technology, but also how a digital humanist thinks and writes about a cultural artifact in new ways. As Bill Endres mentions in his chapter, “A Literacy of Building: Making in the Digital,” these ways “recognize the complex intellectual task of building, its scholarly ideological construction, and its kinship with linguistic production” (52).

Throughout the book there are examples of projects—artifacts, texts, and experiences—and they function as both digital humanities final products and as digital humanities subjects for further study. More than any other discussion of the digital humanities, this book had me questioning and circling the examples: What is the digital humanities product? Is it the thing, this essay about the thing, or both together?

In “Thinking as Handwork: Critical Making with Humanistic Concerns,” Gabby Resch, Dan Southwick, Isaac Record, and Matt Ratto discuss 3-D printing as a medium. The authors describe the interdisciplinary entanglement of making and studying 3-D printing, identifying “STS (science and technology studies), critical theory, digital humanities (DH), design, feminist technoscience, human-computer interaction (HCI), maker cultures, and a number of cognate disciplines and movements” (152) as co-conspirators. They also write about how GLAMS (galleries, libraries, archives, and museums) are engaging with 3-D printing. The authors write about the process of 3-D printing (which the authors are doing) but also describe it as a process done by others and 3-D printed artifacts as objects to study. It is a fascinating chapter that challenges the reader “to think

productively about materiality by demonstrating how material interventions trouble theoretical work (and vice versa)” (151).

“Dialogic Objects in the Age of 3-D Printing: The Case of the Lincoln Life Mask” takes a singular instance of 3-D printing as its subject. In the chapter, Susan Garfinkel looks at the 1865 Abraham Lincoln life mask—“a copy of a copy of a copy, even before it became a 3-D model to be copied via printing yet again” (206). Garfinkel’s chapter is not alone in its focus on copies and the affordances of digital materials. As everyone moves to a humanities landscape that is working with digital primary sources, humanists are looking toward library ontologies to help keep track of it all. In “Experience Design for the Humanities,” Stan Ruecker and Jennifer Roberts-Smith look at the conceptual ontology for libraries known as Functional Requirements for Bibliographic Records (FRBR) (263). They offer the case of a performance of a symphony as an example of how FRBR can be used to distinguish precise instances of one work.

In an opposite direction, there is also a call in this volume for a less digital, digital humanities practice. In his essay “The Making of a Digital Humanities Neo-Luddite,” Marcel O’Gorman asks, “Is it possible to imagine a version of digital humanities (DH) based on the same sort of make-oriented, neo-Luddistic practices? How would it work, and what would it accomplish?” (117). O’Gorman uses examples of “analog objects such as homemade radios, conductive play dough, and even media theory essays—as long as these objects-to-think-with are created in the context of digital culture, with the purpose of questioning technocratic ideologies that are uncritical in their modes of digital production and that constrain innovation to the standards of efficiency and marketability” (124).

Melissa Rogers picks up on this craft thread in her essay, “Making Queer Feminisms Matter,” where she focuses on textiles and emphasizing “craft is praxis—an epistemological framework from which to approach the meanings of design and fabrication and a method for making textiles and other real objects.” Similar to O’Gorman, Rogers states that craft can connect us to “older and still ubiquitous modes of cultural production” (238). Indeed, that which is old is new again.

Conclusion

Making Things is an important addition to the field of the digital humanities because it thoughtfully and comprehensively investigates themes of invisible labor, gender and making, inverting hierarchies, collaboration, and risk-taking. Reading about digital humanities has many benefits for archivists, and anyone working or wanting to work on digital humanities projects should read this. Overall, this book expanded my understanding of what the digital humanities are and can be.