New Digital Worlds: Postcolonial Digital Humanities in Theory, Praxis, and Pedagogy
Roopika Risam
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Roopika Risam's new book sets itself a formidable task: to bring together two crucial academic fields and, in so doing, perhaps set the terms of debate for a third (or at least for a subfield), that of postcolonial digital humanities. Postcolonialism first emerged in the West (the irony is noted) in the 1980s, after the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism*, and followed by a slew of books from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Aijaz Ahmed, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, the Subaltern Studies group, and of course many others. This history does not need rehearsing for readers of this journal, and Risam—whose text cites precisely these authors—also pays attention to more recent challenges from the decolonial tendencies (Dussell, Mignolo) and Indigenous studies. Digital Humanities may be less known by stellar scholars, although Risam does criticize the field for an over-reliance on such Global North luminaries as Franco Moretti, Lev Manovich, and Matthew Kirschenbaum, the last of whom also features prominently in Risam's narrative (73-74). DH's coming to visibility in the past decade has been more fraught, however, happening as it did during the eclipse of the traditional humanities in many Western universities, so that some critics have seen, perhaps unfairly, its embrace by administrators more enthralled by the science and technology side of the field than its critical methodologies. Indeed, social justice issues aside (but we will come back to them!), Poco and DH may have something in common in similar attitudes towards the canon. Except that while postcolonialism is rightly critical of Western and Global North humanities for its indebtedness not only to a literary canon but also a canon read in an apolitical and ahistorical manner (true not only of the pre-theory academy but also much of the structuralist and post-structuralist periods in the 1970s and 1980s), DH, it turns out, traffics in that very canon (which is more likely to be digitized and transformed into Big Data) while discarding the more thorough-going critical stance that postcolonialism, it turns out, still wishes to pursue.

New Digital Worlds maps out what it calls "A Tale of Two Subfields," first examining the ways in which, on the one hand, humanities computing developed both as a way to mobilize "computational approaches to textual analysis" and as a way to develop such African-Americanist "digital recovery projects" as Voices

from the Gap and the Black Poetry Page (26-27), and, on the other hand, again a story which readers of this journal will know, the visible advent of postcolonial studies amidst the theory boom of the 1970s and 1980s. A significant trope throughout the volume is the idea of the "digital cultural record"; indeed, working off a digital copy of the book, one finds the keyword occurring 164 times, making use of a method of reading which is, of course, only a rudimentary example of DH. Risam here argues that postcolonial DH shows us not only what is missing from the digital cultural record, and not only why those gaps are due both to the imperial past and to inequality in the present, but, crucially, how the mitigating of those absences must not merely be an additive process but one that is attentive to the communities that postcolonial scholars and activists serve.

Thus the book begins with an account of how, in 2017, Columbia University's Group for Experimental Methods in the Humanities responded to Hurricane Maria with the "Puerto Rico Mapathon for Hurricane Relief," as a way of improving tools being used by aid organizations. But more than such immediate uses for postcolonial DH, Risam also points to more subtle and critical efforts, ranging from how the Early Caribbean Digital Archive discovered hitherto unknown slave narratives to the possibilities for "recovery and repatriation" of the archive made evident in the Bichitra Online Tagore Variorum at Jadavpur University in Calcutta (58-59). In Risam's always perspicuous telling, these efforts must themselves be seen in a way that attends to the worlding of DH, where computational efforts are not merely seen as the West and the rest, but as a kind of "e-diaspora," a global view of the discipline (or sub-field) made possible with the visualizations and games of John Montague and Luciano Frizzera's "The DH Experience" and Alex Gil's "Around Digital Humanities in 80 days." Juxtaposing these mappings of DH against hegemonic accounts of capital-intensive DH centres (which tend to favour Western and Global North universities), Risam argues that students and researchers must conceive of the sub-field in an emancipatory fashion.

Risam also works to bridge the gap between students and professors—and here she demonstrates that lightweight digital methods using accessible tools like Voyant to map words in a given text or Ngram to track usage in printed texts over decades—can work at the undergraduate level. For the latter, for example, seeing how "Dalit" has surpassed "Untouchable" in usage adds to a reading of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. Larger-scale projects—from Wikipedia edits of Teju Cole's page to maps of "Ethnic L.A." or "A Cultural Atlas of Global Blackness" are also given their due and rich situating. Risam's book is an invaluable resource for the scholar, the activist, the teacher, and anyone interested in the intersection of

postcolonial social justice and the utopian promises of digital humanities.

This is not to say that there are not infelicities of style or purpose at work here. Paragraphs often begin thus: "Examining" some state of the fields' or disciplinary landscapes. Risam also relies heavily on such unexamined keywords as "cultural record" and "worldbuilding." More structurally problematic are an under-developed consideration of the ideologies at work in concepts like "digital natives" and "digital immigrants" (unusual, as you can imagine, in a volume on postcolonialism: see pages 89-91) and a too-ready willingness to adopt the DH mantra that building and hacking are of more worth than mere critique or the writing of an essay (here ventriloquized via Mark Sample: see page 93).

In some ways, DH and postcolonialism are the two halves that cannot meet; but herein lies this book's promise. For if the dystopian "bad future" would entail a Global North DH that is content to read a digitized Western canon (via the Walt Whitman archive, say) with "distant" reading techniques that forgo critique, a "utopian" future is also suggested. This future is one where postcolonialism smuggles its unrelenting criticism into projects that do not merely add a Rabindranath Tagore or Caribbean digital fonds, but also promises a world where the digital cultural record is available to all.