



## Frozen Social Relations and Time for a Thaw: Visibility, Exclusions, and Considerations for Postcolonial Digital Archives

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## DIGITAL FORUM

### Frozen Social Relations and Time for a Thaw: Visibility, Exclusions, and Considerations for Postcolonial Digital Archives

Martha Nell Smith

... the degree to which American society has embraced and absorbed computer technologies is astonishing. The degree to which the changes provoked by computers leave prevailing inequalities is troubling.<sup>1</sup>

At a time when postcolonial, feminist, critical race, sexuality, queer and class critical inquiries have had such a profound effect for decades in the humanities, the configurations of mainstream, major agency-funded digital humanities often appear to be framed by the politics of exclusion and occlusion that diversity-embracing scholars and theorists have worked so long to transform. In 2014, this is still so persistently the case that emerging feminist scholars imagine that queer worlds must be built in the ‘digital margins’, and ‘The Digital Humanities as a Historical “Refuge” from Race/Class/Gender/Sexuality/Disability’, an open thread on the *Postcolonial Digital Humanities* scholarly blog, provoked sometimes quite volatile responses. That thread was in response to my article, ‘The Human Touch, Software of the Highest Order’, which made the point that ‘humanities computing [now digital humanities] seemed to offer a space free from all this messiness [of gender, race, class, sexuality concerns] and a return to objective questions of representation.’<sup>2</sup> Several of the open thread responses denied that there is any kind of diversity problem in digital humanities, and decried a ‘blind focus on identity politics’ (May 11), in turn provoking a Africanist queer theorist to tweet ‘Non-experts in postcolonial, queer, feminist, critical race theories are holding forth unaware.’<sup>3</sup>

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1. Jean F. O’Barr, Editor, Associate Editors and Staff, ‘Editorial’, in *From Hard Drive to Software: Gender, Computers, and Difference (Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society)*, 16.1 (Autumn 1990), 2, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3174604>> [accessed 31 January 2014].
  2. Adeline Koh and Roopika Risam, ‘The Digital Humanities as a Historical “Refuge” from Race/Class/Gender/Sexuality/Disability’, *Postcolonial Digital Humanities*, (May 2013), <<http://dhpoco.org/blog/2013/05/10/open-thread-the-digital-humanities-as-a-historical-refuge-from-raceclassgendersexualitydisability/>> [accessed 11 May 2013]. ‘The Human Touch, Software of the Highest Order: Revisiting Editing as Interpretation’, *Textual Cultures*, 2.1 (2007), 1–15, <<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/txc/summary/v002/2.1.smith.html>> .
  3. @KeguroMacharia, 12 May 2013, <[https://twitter.com/Keguro\\_](https://twitter.com/Keguro_)> [accessed 12 May 2013].

Whether unaware or not, the heated discussions that caused some to apologize or seek apologies result, I contend, from the ‘frozen social relations’ in which, for all of their promise of opening up new avenues of and opportunities for critical inquiry and discovery, even new media and digital humanities often remain fixed, bound by conventions and old paradigms.<sup>4</sup> Anyone working with postcolonial archives is likely aware of those ‘frozen social relations’ about which all working in digital archives should be mindful. What are the consequences of such frozen social orders when they are made to seem like objective features of intellectual life? That is the question with which I will begin, and then append by asking what can we do, what are some of the ways in which we might transform the digital humanities so that innovations are sociological and not only technical. After all, a very real function of the humanities, even humanities’ primary one, is to engage in the act of creativity moment by moment in order to improve the quality of life in the world we live in. I have made similar arguments before, but as that Open Thread, as sections of publications in *Debates in the Digital Humanities*, and as repeated calls for a digital scholarly world that is more diverse attest, those arguments are worth repeating in a 2014 context.<sup>5</sup>

An observation made six years ago by Michael Jensen about a new metrics of scholarly authority that digital resources may present is even more pertinent today for thinking about issues of authority, authoritative, and authoritarian, issues of access, mediation, and remediation, and issues of visibility and exclusion that I foreground:

When the system of scholarly communications was dependent on the physical movement of information goods, we did business in an era of information scarcity. As we become dependent on the digital movement of information goods, we find ourselves entering an era of information abundance. In the process, we are witnessing a radical shift in how we establish authority, significance, and even scholarly validity. That has major implications for, in particular, the humanities and social sciences.<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, the marked changes in the way we produce, share, move, store information do have major implications for authority and scholarly validity, but are we seeing the radical shift, the change in entrenched social orders that Jensen claimed? In some

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4. See Donna Haraway, ‘A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century’, in *Simian, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), and also Katie King, ‘Women in the Web’, *Electronic Book Review* (2003), <<http://www.electronicbookreview.com/thread/technocapitalism/adoptable>> [accessed 31 January 2014] and *Networked Reenactments: Stories Transdisciplinary Knowledges Tell* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

5. Matthew Gold, ed., *Debates in the Digital Humanities* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), extended to an Open Access Edition, <<http://dhdebates.gc.cuny.edu/>>. Even the very welcome issue of differences: *A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 25.1 (2014) on digital humanities features some gatekeeping arguments that are not deeply conversant with queer, critical race, feminist, class theories and criticism.

6. Michael Jensen, ‘The New Metrics of Scholarly Authority’, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 53.41 (15 June 2007), B6–B8, <<https://chronicle.com/article/The-New-Metrics-of-Scholarly/5449/>> [accessed 10 April 2014].

quarters, signs of a thaw in frozen social relations are beginning to be visible and those old social orders disrupted.

*FemTechNet* has been going strong for a year. Instead of a MOOC (Massive Online Open Course), which in spite of Cathy Davidson's impressive augmentations,<sup>7</sup> tends to be top down and posits authority in the professor(s), *FemTechNet* is working with the paradigm of DOCC – Distributed Online Collaborative Course – which institutes key principles of feminist pedagogy that rests on a foundation of 'learner-centered instruction'.<sup>8</sup> Other evidence of the old orders being shaken can be found in a call for papers (CFP) for a special issue of *ADA: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology*. That CFP proposes to bring together ongoing conversations in critical race theory, women of colour feminisms, queer studies, new media studies, and the digital humanities to interrogate the persistence of binaristic Black/White paradigms in US racialization. The CFP mentions scholars working in new media studies such as Lisa Nakamura, Micha Cárdenas, Kara Keeling, and Tara McPherson who provide critical formulations for understanding race, gender, and queerness in our digital age and have persistently pointed to the paucity of diversity in many scholarly digital productions.<sup>9</sup> Yet in scholarly digital humanities, these kinds of inquiry still tend to be exceptional. So how much have the old orders been reinstated by digital humanities resources for knowledge exchange? Who is willing to question those old orders not restructured by race, class, gender, sexuality, queer, and disability studies and who clings to them?

In the thaw we are beginning to see, a related mandated change has begun to emerge – from emphasis on tools to users and collaborative knowledge production. 'Begun' and 'emerge' are key, because frozen social relations characterize some of the largest, most prominent digital archive projects, even as they tout open access. The examples that I offer for this digital forum to show just how a seemingly small matter can reveal considerable regressive coercions will be from Victorian America, which seems more than appropriate for thinking about key issues and concerns about privilege and hierarchies for postcolonial digital archives. Those examples come from my 20 years of experience working with Digital Emily Dickinson resources and my observations are a result of my 20 years in digital humanities. However, they have been reshaped and challenged in the academy, since structures of dominance and privilege organized around gender, race, sexuality, and class continue to pervade our culture and society and do so in DH1 (Steve Ramsay's term).<sup>10</sup> In the world of Digital Dickinsons, those hierarchical structures are most

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7. Cathy Davidson, 'Clearing Up Some Myths about MOOCs', *HASTAC* (2011), <<http://www.hastac.org/blogs/cathy-davidson/2013/06/11/clearing-some-myths-about-moocs>> [accessed 12 June 2013].

8. *FemTechNet Commons*, <<http://femtechnet.newschooledu/>> [accessed 7 April 2014].

9. CFP for 'Hacking the Black/White Binary', *ADA: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology*, <<http://fembotcollective.org/blog/2014/03/12/cfp-ada-issue-5-hacking-the-blackwhite-binary/>> [accessed 31 March 2014].

10. Stephen Ramsay, 'DH Types One and Two', *Stephen Ramsay* (3 May 2013), <<http://stephenramsay.us/2013/05/03/dh-one-and-two/>> [accessed 12 May 2013]. Ramsay defines Type I DH as the community 'formed around the TEI Consortium, the Association for

evident in the Harvard University Press and Houghton Library *Emily Dickinson Archive (EDA)*, for which I serve on the Advisory Board.<sup>11</sup> The frozen social relations one witnesses there will prove invaluable instructive for maintaining a healthy technology of self-consciousness when producing, using, and evaluating postcolonial digital archives.

On the opening screen, the *Emily Dickinson Archive* maintains that it is not a new edition and ‘makes high-resolution images available in open access’ through which readers ‘can view images of manuscripts held in multiple libraries and archives’. This statement makes it sound as if readers can roam freely, as if openness is at the heart of this digital resource. Yet the next sentence reveals the hierarchy and high level of mediation that closes important aspects of access, making clear that at present the *EDA* includes only images for the ‘poems identified in *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Variorum Edition*, edited by R. W. Franklin (Cambridge: Belknap Press of the Harvard University Press, 1998)’.<sup>12</sup> This digital iteration is therefore frozen in time and old paradigms. Immediately highlighted is that even in a medium that can be more open, an author’s work is best when presented not in a lesser mediated, unedited form that direct view of the manuscripts offer, but in a single, most authoritative edition. As do many, this edition operates on the presumption that readers need not be bothered with too many details of judgment that determine what to include and exclude in the making of authorized study objects, in this case ‘Dickinson poems’. That the authority is asserted and then the details of judgment obscured so that they are normalized as Dickinson poems are the two most important factors relevant for seeing how imperial power can infuse and close access to that which purports to be open. In a particular postcolonial archive does something similar occur – a legitimating authority invoked and then principles of selection of artifacts obscured or curated to reveal only so much? If so, then users need to work to lift the veil shrouding that recordkeeping and thereby determining what remainders are worthy to keep and study.<sup>13</sup>

In the world of Dickinson studies, where the poet’s experimentation with punctuation marks, lineation, and genre are frequently contested, access to documents that have helped generate important questions about her poetics and writing practices are policed in the *Emily Dickinson Archive* via searchability and presentation, reinforcing already received senses of ontologies and critical understandings. So opportunity for fresh discovery is impeded. Though the claim to open access appears to deny that there is any concomitant claim to the definitive, the *EDA*’s structure tells a very different story. Consider the case of the document Dickinson

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Literary and Linguistic Computing, the Association for Computing in the Humanities, and the Consortium for Computing in the Humanities in the early nineties’ <<http://stephenramsay.us/2013/05/03/dh-one-and-two/>> [accessed May 2013].

11. *Emily Dickinson Archive* (2013–), <<http://www.edickinson.org/faq#5>> [accessed 18 October 2013].

12. ‘Home’, *Emily Dickinson Archive*, <<http://www.edickinson.org/>> [accessed 12 May 2014].

13. Readers might be interested in Anjali Arondekar’s extended analysis in *For the Record: On Sexuality and the Colonial Archive in India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).

begins with ‘Morning | might come | by Accident – | Sister –’.<sup>14</sup> Even a novice user of a digital resource would assume that a search for ‘Morning might come’ would direct one to this image, but such a search, even when done from the same screen as that on which the image appears, results in ‘0 results for “Morning might come”’. This is true from any location of the search box throughout the *EDA*. Yet a search for ‘Show me eternity’ takes one directly to this document image. Why? Because the search parameters are policed by what has been identified as a ‘Dickinson poem’ by the Harvard University Press’ most recent Variorum. In that, ‘Show me | Eternity, and | I will show | you Memory –’ is identified as the opening of a poem, ‘Franklin numbers 1658’. The first part of the document is identified in the Harvard edition as a letter, and so is in effect ignored by the apparatus of the digital resource, or at least its poetic possibilities are elided. So only that which has been identified as a Harvard University Press-sanctioned poem, not that which is actually on the documents, the surviving records, can be found through searching the *Emily Dickinson Archive*. In that key way, the *EDA* is in fact closed access, not open access. The information abundant in the documents themselves may or may not be seen by an *EDA* user. In this instance, a happy accident of presentation is that the Harvard edition-identified poem begins on a document page with other, to many scholars, telling pieces of information.

Sometimes the search does not happen upon such a happy accident, as it were, where a reader can see for herself what is on the document and understand where it is situated in the Dickinson oeuvre. Consider the case of “‘*Speech*’ – is a prank | of Parliament –’.<sup>15</sup> A search for that poem renders a page within a letter identified as p. 2 (though it is in fact p. 3 on the second leaf of a folio). Only if a reader uses the arrows below the image will the letter in which the poem is enclosed be discovered, and then only if the user clicks backward twice. So a slightly curious reader might well find the letter in which the poem was enclosed and thus gain access to one way in which Dickinson wove her poems into letters, but the move is not encouraged or even admitted as a possibility by the *EDA*. The case of ‘Before I got my Eye | put out’ does not provide even this opportunity.<sup>16</sup> Though the first image of the poem is of a document originally enclosed in a letter to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, that epistolary document is at the Boston Public Library. The letter begins ‘Are these more orderly?’ and at one point exclaims, ‘All men say “What” to me, but I thought it a fashion’.<sup>17</sup> The possible play between the letter wondering whether all men in fact misunderstand her writings and the poem with an ‘I’ saying she has been blinded is

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14. *Emily Dickinson Archive*, <[http://www.edickinson.org/editions/1/image\\_sets/70472](http://www.edickinson.org/editions/1/image_sets/70472)> [accessed 18 October 2013]. Also, this is true about the search function even though #5 in FAQ points directly to this document. <<http://www.edickinson.org/faq#5>> [Accessed 18 October 2013].

15. *Emily Dickinson Archive*, <[http://www.edickinson.org/editions/1/image\\_sets/72484](http://www.edickinson.org/editions/1/image_sets/72484)> [accessed 18 October 2013].

16. *Emily Dickinson Archive*, <[http://www.edickinson.org/editions/1/image\\_sets/70353](http://www.edickinson.org/editions/1/image_sets/70353)> [accessed 18 October 2013].

17. Ms. Am. 1093(15), *Emily Dickinson Papers*, Boston Public Library. Available at Flickr, <[https://www.flickr.com/photos/boston\\_public\\_library/2403508836/in/set-](https://www.flickr.com/photos/boston_public_library/2403508836/in/set-)

impossible to recover in the ‘open’ *EDA*. The question for postcolonial archives is: what has been made very difficult or impossible to discover by the structures of archival organization, and what is or is not made transparent?

How are these brief examples from the Harvard *Emily Dickinson Archive* relevant to considerations of the postcolonial digital archive and to questions that generated this forum – about materials at a distance from the imperial centre, bias in types of projects and resources, whether digital resources provide opportunity to analyze or address the politics of the non-digital archive, and what sorts of digital methodologies should be pursued? For one thing, the *EDA* brings together selected images from libraries and archives at a geographic distance from Harvard only in a highly mediated way, through the empire of the variorum. The bias of the *EDA* is that of the Variorum, not that of Dickinson documents, and the Variorum centers the *EDA*, not Dickinson’s documents. Opportunities to analyze the politics of Harvard’s non-digital archive, which for decades has been far more restrictive than that at Amherst College about access to the manuscripts themselves, are almost impossible to uncover, much less interrogate, through the *EDA*. Tellingly, Harvard’s ‘Copyright and Terms of Use’ statement asserts intellectual property, recommending that users quote from Harvard University Press books and redirecting them to the Press’s rights and permissions office. In contrast, at the bottom of every Dickinson document in Amherst’s online *Emily Dickinson Collection* is an assertion enabling and recommending scholarly inquiry: ‘Amherst College provides this item to support research and scholarship. Amherst College can neither grant nor deny permission to publish or quote from materials in its collections. Neither titles nor facts can be copyrighted; therefore, permission is not required to cite a collection as a source or to use facts from it.’<sup>18</sup> So in order to redress this kind of situation in which an imperial closed center is presented as open, what might be done?

Makers and users of postcolonial digital archives should take care to recognize that there tends to be an amnesia or blindness to the fact Geoffrey C. Bowker and Susan Leigh Star described at the end of the twentieth century, that ‘Systems of classifications (and of standardization) form a juncture of social organization, moral order, and layers of technical integration. Each subsystem inherits, increasingly as it scales up, the inertia of the installed base of systems that have come before.’<sup>19</sup> Tools cannot be separated from the knowledge systems in which they have been imagined and made, and Harvard’s *Emily Dickinson Archive* demonstrates that well. The scholarly order that produced the ways in which the Harvard producers see a ‘Dickinson poem’ is assumed to be an objective fact of critical inquiry rather than something to be questioned. In fact, to pretend that reality can be dismembered to separate the

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72157604466722178 > and <[https://www.flickr.com/photos/boston\\_public\\_library/2403509440/in/set-72157604466722178/](https://www.flickr.com/photos/boston_public_library/2403509440/in/set-72157604466722178/)> [accessed 21 June 2010].

18. See <<http://www.edickinson.org/terms>> and <<http://www.hup.harvard.edu/rights/>> [accessed 18 October 2013]. See ‘Further in summer than the birds’, *Emily Dickinson Collection*, <<https://acdc.amherst.edu/view/asc:17889>> (2012) [accessed 12 May 2014].

19. Geoffrey C. Bowker and Susan Leigh Star, *Sorting Things Out: Classification and Its Consequences* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), p. 33.

structures of a study object's being from all other concerns (as is the case when one sees how parts of Dickinson documents are dismembered from one another) is to be caught in those hierarchies of power, apparently unaware. In the suggestion actively to recognize structures of power, I urge the technology of healthy self-consciousness and mindfulness I have been recommending for more than a decade.

Also, makers of postcolonial digital archives need to be explicit about who is producing the resource and for what purposes. Questions basic to feminist, critical race, sexuality and class critical inquiries are certainly worth asking of all postcolonial digital archives: how have these items of knowledge and the organizations and working groups who made them come into being? Who has stakes in their presentation? What is visible in these new media archives and what might not be? Can what is invisible but relevant be known to users of new digital archives? Producers should make every effort to make clear what has been occluded by remediation, by principles and practices of selection, and to unfreeze old binaries of authority and involve users in knowledge production. Whose work is visible in the postcolonial digital archive, and what is happening when only certain actors and associated achievements come into public view and are given agency?

Obvious but worth saying again and yet again is that makers of postcolonial digital archives should tout as invaluable tools the monumental paradigm shifts in epistemological formulations generated by feminist criticism and theory, critical race studies and theory, queer theory and class studies. These tools should be described as every bit as powerful as any technological advance. In fact, since they are human software tools, I have continued to argue that such critical tools are the most valuable. Involving non-experts in the many more pairs of eyes that are brought to bear on primary evidence can also produce serendipitous insights. For one thing, non-experts in matters digital, editorial, and critical do not have to unlearn that which they have been trained not even to question or see and can (and often do) bring fresh perspectives. Collaboration in digital archival production can reach across and thaw hierarchies so that users become producers and vice versa. For example, an undergraduate reader of *Emily Dickinson's Correspondences* suggested that 'But Susan is | a Stranger yet –' might actually be 'But Susan is | a Stranger set –'.<sup>20</sup> Changing the one word from 'yet' to 'set' substantively alters Dickinson's meanings. With the familiar (because passed through the hands of several editors) 'yet', Susan Dickinson is still remote, not yet known by those who have 'never scaled / Her Haunted House' no matter how often they 'cite' her. 'Yet' holds out the possibility that Susan might still be better known. With the previously unsuggested 'set', Susan Dickinson becomes unknowable and that situation unchangeable, but trained pairs of eyes are not likely even to see this possibility and perhaps would scoff at the very suggestion of it, especially since two Variorum translations of this handwritten word did not even

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20. *Emily Dickinson's Correspondences*, <<http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/edc/display.xqy?doc=/edc/DEAmsEDCSHDhb62.1b.xml>> [accessed February 2009]; see also *Emily Dickinson Archive*, <[http://www.edickinson.org/editions/1/image\\_sets/70134](http://www.edickinson.org/editions/1/image_sets/70134)> [accessed 31 May 2014].



entertain the option. Yet the possibility only adds to the reading pleasures of speculation that in turn create more reflection on what is seen and supposedly understood. When the alternative word suggested by a non-expert reader is seen as viable, experts are more likely to reevaluate received information that in turn offers opportunities for building new knowledge, in this case about Dickinson's meanings, that simply was not possible before.<sup>21</sup> While this example is about a poet, her word choices, and meanings, such a different way of seeing could in other instances lead to much larger and more profound realizations. Though non-human technology can compile information, only humans produce knowledge and do so best working parallaxically so that as many critical viewpoints as possible are enabled.

Innovation continues to be a hot term, especially in the digital world. What counts as innovation should persistently be questioned, especially since technological innovation has repeatedly overshadowed innovations in knowledge building, including methods of knowledge production. These suggestions all come from methods generated by feminist criticism and theory, critical race studies, sexuality studies and queer theory, and class studies and have advanced and otherwise improved my own work, and, as is surely obvious, can improve the work of digital humanities, scholarly editing, computer science, information studies, library science and humanities computing. The frozen social relations of old orders can and should be thawed in order to enable sociological innovations, which should be key and self-consciously incorporated into the production of any postcolonial digital archive.

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21. For another, even more telling example, see 'Computing: What's American Literary Study Got to Do with IT?', *American Literature*, 74.4 (2002), 833–58. There a non-expert reader pointed out to me that a poem I had identified as an ekphrastic response to John Kensett's 'Sunset with Cows' is in fact an elegy for Emily Dickinson. <<http://www.jstor.org.proxy-um.researchport.umd.edu/stable/40281559>> [accessed 31 May 2014].