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## Digital Humanities as Community Engagement: The Digital Watts Project

Melanie Hubbard

*Loyola Marymount University*, [melanie.hubbard@lmu.edu](mailto:melanie.hubbard@lmu.edu)

Dermot Ryan

*Loyola Marymount University*, [dryan11@lmu.edu](mailto:dryan11@lmu.edu)

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## Chapter 10

# Digital Humanities as Community Engagement: The Digital Watts Project

Melanie Hubbard

Dermot Ryan

Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles, CA, United States

The Digital Watts Project was a Loyola Marymount University (LMU) English class taught in the summer of 2016 that focused on the 1965 Watts “Uprising” or “Riots” in Los Angeles. We designed and taught the class with the intention of introducing students to methodologies and debates within the emergent field of digital humanities (DH), while collaborating with the Southern California Library (SCL). Dedicated to documenting and making available the histories of antiracist struggles in Southern California, SCL is a community archive in South Los Angeles. For their final project, students in the class were tasked with creating an online digital collection of rare Watts-related materials provided by the SCL. Why we chose to create a collection is simple: the SCL wanted to start digitizing their materials and making them available online, and this was a way of helping them get started. Because of the interdisciplinary nature of the class’s subject matter and the central project, we invited a number of presenters to bring their disciplinary perspective and expertise to our classroom. We conceived the course as, of necessity, a learning community in which all participants, faculty, students, and guest presenters, would be working through questions together. We will discuss in detail the origins of our librarian/faculty partnership; the ways in which our partnership with the SCL influenced how we designed and taught our course; and the principles that guided our course. We will also share our vision for the digital collection, which we see as the foundation of a larger public humanities project.

Our partnership began in 2014 when an exchange of emails revealed a shared interest in learning more about and engaging with DH. It made sense to pool our knowledge and expertise, to develop a shared vision for DH at LMU, to troubleshoot responses to the inevitable institutional roadblocks we would encounter, and to share the responsibilities and labor that go along with exploring a new field and fostering broader interdisciplinary collaborations. From the beginning, our partnership benefited from having shared goals: we sought to foster undergraduate research in the humanities, to develop and promote

new ways of teaching information and digital literacy, and to figure out the appropriate role of DH at our university, whose mission is both student-centered and committed to the promotion of justice. We also realized that our scholarly pursuits and orientation overlapped in important ways. Melanie, Digital Scholarship Librarian, has an MA in literary studies, and a background in archives and special collections. Much of her work as a librarian focuses on engaging students in forms of digital scholarship that pushes them to grapple with the complexities and ethical implications of working digitally and publicly. Her own scholarship touches on a number of issues concerning the relationship between material and digital culture, and often draws from theories and methods found within literary studies. As a postcolonial scholar and professor of English, Dermot has an abiding interest in archives, representation, and power. In a very real sense, postcolonial studies' founding concern was with the question of representing places and communities—specifically the representation of colonized spaces and communities by colonizers: how do these spaces and communities get represented? Who gets to represent these spaces and communities? Indeed, the classic of Subaltern Studies, Ranajit Guha's *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* dealt, in large part, with how one represents an uprising, in this case the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857. Much of Guha's study posed a question that brought the archive and representation into sharp focus: how do you represent an uprising when the vast majority of reports on the origins and actions of this rebellion are from the police archives? As we began to imagine the broad contours of "The Digital Watts Project," these insistent questions in Dermot's research attained a renewed relevance.

The Digital Watts Project grew out of the English Graduate Program's ongoing collaboration with the SCL, the goals of which had been to show students not only ways their critical reading, writing, and research skills could be used outside of the academy, but also how humanities work could contribute to on-the-ground efforts to promote justice. In the summer of 2015—the 50th anniversary of the Watts uprising—we discussed with Yusef Omowale, the library's director, the possibility of focusing on Watts. Yusef agreed to provide the library's archival material related to Watts, but suggested we widen the historical range of documents so that they would invite accounts of 1965 that situated the events in a much broader context of the history of race and racism in Los Angeles. When we designed the class, we kept in mind Yusef's call for us to approach Watts with a broader lens. From the outset, we coordinated closely with the SCL to ensure the class and its project developed in directions that were consistent with the library's mission. One of our most powerful class sessions occurred early in the semester, when Yusef and two young men from the neighborhood laid out in stark terms the harmful effects of so much well-meaning social justice activism in their community. We had to confront the frank skepticism of locals that our work would, or could, benefit the community in any way. This prompted us to think of the kind of online resources that might make our work useful to educators and community activists. More generally, the

SCL, and those who looked to the library as a community resource, prompted us to ask how the work we do in the class could be relevant to their lives and struggles.

As literary scholars, we believed literature could help illuminate the events of 1965, having the potential to represent how the history of race and racism is lived from the inside. Because so much of the official and mainstream accounts of the Watts events were both compromised by the racial politics that fed into the Watts narrative, and failed to give voice to the perspectives of the African-Americans who lived there, we believed it was important to supply those perspectives through literature. We also believed that literature—by allowing us to encounter worlds and experiences that are different than our own, through eyes and emotions that are not ours—might better prepare us to sympathetically and responsibly represent these events in our digital project. So, while we assigned Gerald Horne’s history of the Watts uprising, *The Fire This Time* (1997), and a number of contemporary accounts of the events, ranging from Thomas Pynchon’s essay, “A Journey into the Mind of Watts” (1966) to *CBS Reports 1965* documentary, *Watts: Riot or Revolt?*, our commitment to offering more perspectives around Watts led us to choose literary fiction and nonfiction written before and after the uprising, including James Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time* [1], Wanda Coleman’s *The Riot Inside Me* [2], and Ta-Nehisi Coates’ *Between the World and Me* [3]. We selected these literary texts with an eye for those elements that sometimes do not show up in the official accounts of events like riots or uprisings. For instance, Coleman’s memoir helped us to recognize the slow violence of racist zoning, racist transportation and public school policies, and white flight. A challenge in responding to, or organizing politically to, address the negative developments that occur in neighborhoods and communities like Watts is that these developments often occur slowly and incrementally (and thus, in some ways, invisibly). One of the most effective aspects of Coleman’s narrative is the way she reminds us of the obvious (but often forgotten) fact that large-scale historical events and developments are often experienced as if in slow motion, as lives gradually unravel. Coleman also provided us with a sense of how this slow violence feels from the inside: how it feels when structural racism shapes much of your life as a young person growing up in South Los Angeles. The inclusion of literature in our class served as an important counterpoint to the documentary accounts (*CBS Reports*) and contemporary journalistic accounts (“A Journey into the Mind of Watts”), underscoring the multiperspectival nature of these events.

Because our intention was to create a digital collection that would grow into a larger digital public humanities project, we needed to understand the greater implications of what that would mean. Amy Woodson-Boulton, LMU Professor of History, spoke to our class about public history and public humanities. Woodson-Boulton underscored a number of key points that informed our thinking about the public history component of our project: that public history itself has a history, and that different places and times

preserve their communal memories and official origin stories in different ways; public history and public memory can be different, and are sometimes at odds. We explored the potential institutional and political tension between “academic history” and “public history.” As a class, we discussed whether this distinction is a result of historians simply addressing different audiences, or whether we are seeing the emergence of new methods, or the increasing participation of communities who tend to work in different institutional settings. This session also raised questions with direct pertinence to our work on the Watts uprising and the SCL: who gets to speak to and as the “public?” Who gets to speak for particular communities and their history? Noting that so many of the origin stories of public history are linked to institutions of the state, we discussed how we could avoid our own contribution to public history becoming what Raymond Williams describes as a “selective tradition” that serves up versions of the past intended to ratify the status quo [4].

In part, our purpose for creating a digital collection with rare Watts-related materials was to provide access to information that had been omitted from the “official record” and, thus, to open up space for new interpretations of the events of 1965. We wanted to challenge the myth that Watts was a race riot that caught sunny Los Angeles and the entire nation by surprise. To dispel the “bolt out of the blue” narrative, Robert Singleton, LMU professor of economics, spoke to our class both from the standpoint of an economist who focuses on minority economic disparities, and as one who observed the conditions in the early 1960s in South Los Angeles. While a graduate student at UCLA, Singleton, who was on the staff of the Institute of Industrial Relations, helped to conduct and prepare a 1964 study titled, “Hard-Core Unemployment and Poverty in Los Angeles.” This study, unlike the US Census, which had grossly underestimated employment and poverty issues in South Los Angeles, was carefully designed to highlight problems specific to that area, and diagnosed deep economic dysfunction in the neighborhood a year prior to the uprising. In addition to explaining the implications of the study, Singleton shared his experience of conducting the study—the poverty he saw, the issues he observed between the police and community members, the serious flaws with previous studies—and about his experience as an African-American graduate student during a time of increasing racial tension.

Our thinking about our digital collection was heavily informed by Saidiya Hartman’s article “Venus in Two Acts” [5], which brought to light not only the ways in which the archival records of slavery serve so often “as a death sentence, a tomb, a display of the violated body, an inventory of property” p. 2, but also the possibility of mobilizing this same archival material to narrate a counter-history of slavery. We were inspired by Hartman’s attempt to use the inventories of slaves as a kind of historical redress, as an effort to restore some historical agency to the murdered slave Venus of the essay’s title. We were particularly struck by Hartman’s desire to make her counter-history

simultaneously a “history of the present” p. 4. In other words, we felt that the events of Watts properly understood could cast light on the continued specter of racism in the United States. We shared her sense that such an archival project would have to be inseparable from “the incomplete project of freedom,” and the continued vulnerability of black lives to “premature death and to gratuitous acts of violence” p. 4. We felt that if our work with the Watts materials eventually took shape as a public history or a public humanities project, we would try similarly to honor these two broad meanings of Watts: as part of an incomplete struggle for freedom, and a marker of the historical and continued precariousness of black lives. In this sense, we were less invested in historical objectivity than in considering how our project might serve as a resource for broader contemporary challenges to racism.

To prepare students for working with the SCL materials, and for the responsibility of creating a public online collection, we explored the theory and practice of archiving, particularly the historical use of archival materials as instruments of power, control, and surveillance: what Hartman in her article has described as the violence of the archive [5]. Our focus on archives was interwoven with discussions and readings about information systems and information organization methods, e.g., classification. Students needed to learn how to engage critically with the SCL objects they would be digitizing, and about the various challenges that come with making those materials available through digital means. Safiya Noble, UCLA professor in the Department of Information Studies, whose current scholarship focuses on racial and gender bias in algorithms, came to talk with our students about the deeper complexity of information systems, and the ways in which they have inherent biases, and how, in the case of a platform like Google, for instance, they can perpetuate racist and sexist stereotypes. We discussed the racist/sexist mindset embedded in algorithm design, and the impact that such algorithms have on information findability; the fact that prejudicial content dominates the web; common information-seeking behaviors (i.e., only reading the first page of search results); long established racist/sexist classification systems; and the illusion that algorithms participate in machine-like objectivity. Much of our class discussion turned on the implications of Noble’s insights for our own efforts to develop metadata that users would use to navigate the Watts collection.

Committed to meeting the accessibility and usability needs of their community, the SCL’s one imperative was that we create the collection’s metadata specifically for South Los Angeles residents. The need to reach a local community—to use a more local vocabulary, not a “universal” one, meant that certain library conventions, i.e., the use of Library of Congress Subject Headings, were not only insufficient, but could undermine our effort. As a result, students had to create their own subject terms (and thus their own information organization system), for which the course readings, speaker presentations, and class discussions were meant to help prepare them. The SCL’s request also made us

acutely aware of how our training had accustomed us to writing for a narrow academic audience and, in response, students had to make a concerted effort to avoid terminology that would implicitly address academics, and thus act as a kind of barrier between the materials and the people to whom they might be most valuable. As we moved into the metadata creation process, students were asked to consider the power inherent in creating an organization system, and the potential pitfalls of assigning subject terms to archival materials, for the act of “naming” (labeling, categorizing, classifying, etc.) inevitably would shape the way the materials were found and interpreted [6]. With the understanding that all “naming” systems privilege one point of view over others, we addressed the fact that our work would inevitably be biased, and that the act of assigning subject terms, while not inherently bad (and was, in fact, necessary) was, as Geoffrey C. Bowker and Susan Leigh Star call it, “dangerous” due to its ethical implications [7]. Nowhere were the perils of an information organization choice made more apparent than when the class conducted what we thought was a straightforward exercise inspired by Wanda Coleman’s *The Riot Inside Me* [2]. As part of our effort to study media discourse around race, we tasked students with comparing a *Jet Magazine* article she cites in her memoir about the 1954 lynching of Emmett Till to the *New York Times*’ coverage of this event. Unsurprisingly for the period, the *Times*’ article was minimal and failed to convey the viciousness and injustice of the crime. What was shocking, however, was how the *Times* “categorized” it. The article was placed in the Sports section and, within that, a subsection that covers miscellany. For us, the discovery was revelatory. It showed, in no uncertain terms, how choices concerning information organization could add to a historical violence, and it drove home for students the importance of their decision-making in their own work.

Our work with the SCL, and our efforts to make their materials accessible online, demonstrates how digital projects can serve communities within and beyond the university. We plan to grow this project by incorporating it into LMU classes in a variety of disciplines and other student-community engagement activities. For us, the digital collection serves as a launching point for a larger digital project that we can envision expanding in a number of directions: in terms of method, we would like the project to go beyond digitizing materials to developing a fully-fledged digital public humanities resource; in terms of scope, we hope that our work can expand beyond the original focus on the events of 1965. Because a digital project like ours is scalable (there are a range of tasks to match the different skillsets and knowledge of undergraduates and graduates) and ongoing (many classes over many semesters can contribute to its development), it can challenge the canard that student research in the humanities is inherently noncollaborative, and distracts faculty from their own research. The tasks needed to develop a public humanities project can be parsed into manageable units. It is capacious enough to generate projects that invite student/faculty collaboration, while allowing faculty to realize their own scholarly projects. Such projects offer an alternative to the

traditional model in the humanities of sponsoring individual student research projects, and imagine a research model in which faculty, undergraduates, and graduates all contribute to a larger multiyear research project.

Our librarian/faculty partnership has been successful because we share a common view of how DH can contribute to our university's student-centered culture and serve communities beyond the university. Together, we have come to believe that the specific form DH engagement takes should be determined to some extent by the identity and mission of the participants' institution. Recognizing that LMU is primarily an undergraduate university, we see DH as an effective way of not only fostering undergraduate research in the humanities, but as a way to embolden all undergraduates to become active participants and stakeholders in the creation, preservation, and curation of cultural materials and practices. It can also provide our students, both undergraduate and graduate, with advanced research and technology skills. At the same time, we have come to see DH as a means by which we can honor our university's institutional commitment to the promotion of justice by developing a project that seeks to support SCL and its community activism. The direction of our work on the library's Watts materials has been dictated as much by their needs and our sense of how to make the materials useful to their activism against racism as our desire to contribute to our students' educational needs. Indeed, we have discovered that these broad goals are not in tension: our students learn so much more when they feel that their work is contributing to the community beyond the walls of the university.

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