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# DECOLONIZING THE DIGITAL HUMANITIES IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

*Roopika Risam*

In recent years, the question of what it means to “decolonize” digital humanities has been broached by scholars engaged in both postcolonial digital humanities and #TransformDH, strands of the field that have pushed for greater attention to digital humanities projects and methods that foreground intersectional engagement with race, gender, class, sexuality, nation, disability, and other axes of identity that shape knowledge production. Such approaches to digital humanities have asked how to decolonize the archive (Povinelli 2011; Lothian & Phillips 2013; Cushman 2013; cárdenas et al. 2015; Risam 2015), address gaps in knowledge produced online (Lor and Britz 2005; Sheppard 2005; Koh & Risam 2013), make legible narratives and histories that have gone untold (Rawson 2014; Thorat 2015; Verhoeven 2015), understand the specificities of digital Dalit experience (Nayar 2011), locate the subaltern in cyberspace (Gajjala 2013), or use technologies to push back against existing forms of representation that may be troubling (Sanders 2014; Priego & Gil 2013; Olsen 2014). Taking a look at the theoretical basis of such work in both postcolonial and science and technology studies (STS), this chapter situates the stakes for decolonization within digital humanities, locating a historical scholarly genealogy for this work and outlining what work toward decolonization looks like in practice within digital humanities.

## **Situating Decolonization in Digital Humanities**

Frantz Fanon, the pre-eminent Martiniquan theorist of the colonial condition, offers a comprehensive definition of decolonization in *The Wretched of the Earth*:

Decolonization, which sets out to change the order of the world, is, obviously, a program of complete disorder. But it cannot come as a result of magical practices, nor of a natural shock, nor of a friendly understanding. Decolonization, as we know, is a historical process: that is to say it cannot be understood, it cannot become intelligible nor clear to itself except in the exact measure that we can discern the movements which give it historical form and content.

(Fanon 1963: 36)

As Fanon notes, decolonization is best understood not as a temporal event but as a process. Moreover, it is a process that can only be understood through study of the intellectual, historical, and political dimensions that constitute it. It is here that digital humanities is best poised to intervene: in the affordances of digital technologies that help make decolonization legible and reveal its limits.

Fanon argues that decolonization is necessarily a violent process—violence was a tool of colonial projects, so the master’s tools will dismantle the master’s house. For Fanon, the violence takes physical and figurative forms—the violence engaged by the colonizer against colonial uprisings, armed struggle, the epistemic violence of colonialism, and the violent process of its undoing. In the case of digital humanities, such violence appears in discursive forms. These include reproducing colonial influences in the production of digital knowledge and centering epistemologies and ontologies of the Global North, namely the U.S. and western Europe, which in turn decenters those of Indigenous communities and the Global South. Fanon is a key figure here because his analysis is located in the dynamic between the colonizer and the colonized, between the settler and the native. This is not to say that invoking decolonization is only speaking to the political fact of colonization. On the contrary, it encompasses epistemological dimensions because the political realities of colonization are interdependent with displacement of Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies. The existence of colonization relies on not only ongoing occupation of land but also occupation of regimes of knowledge erected to maintain and legitimate such occupation.

As Kenyan writer Ngugi wa’ Thiong’o (1986) argues, it is not only the colony that needs to be decolonized but also the mind of the colonized. This is a result of the way colonialism entails erasure of knowledge, belief, ways of being, and archives. It requires instantiation of structures like law, citizenship, and nationality that locate the colonizer at its center. Moreover, colonialism is not circumscribed by its temporal limits. Neo-colonialism—the control of a formerly colonized state from the outside via the operations of capitalism—demonstrates how legacies of colonialism persist after decolonization. This phenomenon manifests through globalization, cultural imperialism, foreign aid, and investment by multinational corporations.

Yet, the ways decolonization is often invoked in the context of digital humanities may do violence of their own. They risk becoming empty metaphors without specificity, equating decolonization with the need for diversity in the field. In doing so, they miss the opportunity to articulate the practices necessary for challenging the discursive violence of colonialism in digital knowledge production. This equating of diversity with decolonization is part of a trend within antiracist and other identitarian social justice movements, in which decolonization comes to signify a struggle for identity and recognition in the absence of a colonial condition. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2012) have argued that invoking decolonization solely as a metaphor undermines the real possibility of decolonization for those whose lives are, in fact, determined by colonialism. Purely metaphorical invocations of colonization are a form of appropriation that decenters ongoing struggles for freedom of Indigenous people by recentering whiteness, even when decolonization is being invoked in favor of antiracist or other social justice-oriented movements (Tuck & Yang 2012). When we speak of social justice, it is often in favor of the liberation of oppressed people, of a drive for equity and representation in spaces where they have been disallowed. Yet, decolonization in digital humanities cannot be a simple articulation of the perceived exclusions of the field along lines of race, gender, class, ability, nation, or other axes of privilege and oppression. Such calls promote an “add and stir” approach that suggests the mere addition of “diverse” bodies will transform the practices of digital humanities (Bailey 2011). Instead, the move to decolonize digital humanities requires redress of the traces of colonialism that appear in digital scholarship, which has political

and epistemological implications. While digital humanities offers tremendous potential for democratizing scholarly knowledge, such possibilities are undercut by projects that recreate colonial dynamics or reinforce the Global North as the site of knowledge production.

While many calls for the decolonization of digital humanities have articulated metaphors for dismantling the operations of power that undergird the production of knowledge in the field—the gatekeepers, reviewers, and definitions that delimit the boundaries of digital humanities—such calls efface the violence of colonialism and the violence of decolonization. Therefore, I am suggesting that—when invoking the relationship between decolonization and digital humanities—the central question is not how digital humanities itself could be decolonized but how digital humanities has contributed to the epistemic violence of colonialism and neo-colonialism. This is evident in both its implication in colonial forms of knowledge production and the ways digital humanities has contributed to historical processes of decolonization. Its further possibilities lie in resisting neo-colonialism in projects and tools.

In the context of digital humanities, we find cognates for these questions in postcolonial approaches to technology developed within STS. Sandra Harding's work, for example, has pioneered the field of postcolonial STS (Harding 1998; 2009). Among the achievements of postcolonial STS are the investigation of alternate genealogies for developments in Western science and technology as well as the drafting of counter-histories that write back to dominant narratives (Anderson 2002; Abraham 2006); recovery and development of a critical apparatus around Indigenous forms of knowledge that have historically been displaced or appropriated by Western systems of knowledge (Abraham 2005; Scott 2011); study of the postindependence legacies of colonialism on science and technology and the effects of neo-colonialism (Adas 1997; Ahmed & Stein 2004); and investigation of the conditions of global capital and politics that influence technology development within the West (Khaifan & Gough 2002; Aneesh 2006; Coe & Hess 2013; Amrute 2016).

Building on the work of Harding and others in postcolonial STS, Kavita Philip, Lily Irani, and Paul Dourish (2010) argue for postcolonial computing as a tactic for engaging with technoscience. Rooted in their critiques of the fraught universals proffered within scholarship on human-computer interactions for development, they make the case for attention to the ways that colonial technologies and ways of knowing influence design of computing technology (2010). Postcolonial computing is “a bag of tools that affords us contingent tactics for continual, careful, collective, and always partial reinscriptions of a cultural-technical situation in which we all find ourselves” (2010: 3). It engenders questions of technology and translation, mobility, labor, and infrastructure and how they manifest across cultural contexts.

Syed Mustafa Ali (2014) has proposed that “decolonial computing” is a more appropriate framework. Grounded in Charles Mills' critique of social contract theory, which argues that white supremacy subtends Mills' notion of the “racial contract,” Ali draws on the decolonial theories that emerge from Latin American studies, particularly Walter Dignolo's work. The theories that emerge from postcolonial thought, Ali (2014) argues, are encumbered by the limitations of postcolonial theory, namely insufficient attention to materialist concerns and the Eurocentrism of its philosophical underpinnings. He proposes that decolonial computing reinstates the centrality of systemic racial equalities to these approaches to technology.

Drawing on postcolonial STS, the relationship between decolonization and digital humanities rests on the understanding that humanities-based knowledge production—whether in history, art, literature, or culture, more broadly—has historically been wielded as a technology of colonialism, as important as the technologies of the slave ship and the gun. Therefore, the question at the heart of decolonization and digital humanities is how we can use

technologies to undo the technologies of colonialism. Unlike Fanon's position on the master's tools, Audre Lorde argues, "[t]he master's tools will not dismantle the master's house" (Lorde 1983). Together, the two contradictory statements support the need for the creation of new methods, tools, projects, and platforms to undo the epistemic violence of colonialism and fully realize a decolonized digital humanities. Such inquiry takes many shapes: attending to gaps within archives by interrogating existing ones and building new ones, considering how Indigenous forms of knowledge may be engaged to develop new tools, and seeking the transformative possibilities of technology without ceding to techno-utopianism.

### **Toward Decolonization and Digital Humanities**

At stake in the possibilities for decolonization and digital humanities is the question of the relationship between theory and practice. At key points in the development of the meta-discourse that surrounds digital humanities, the two have been variously pitted against each other, seen as complementary, and described as interdependent. This conversation has taken shape through a number of themes, from the relationship between "hack" (or doing) and "yack" (or talking) (Nowviskie 2014) to the role of tacit knowledge—derived from the act of doing—as a source of theory (Scheinfeldt 2010; Turkel & Elliott 2014; Rockwell 2011; Nowviskie 2012) to the implied theory that informs the development of projects and tools (Bauer 2011). Decolonization in the context of digital humanities is not simply a matter of theory or practice but rather a combination that reiterates that any binary between the two is false. They are both essential and reminiscent of Fanon's reflection on decolonization: "If we want humanity to advance a step farther, if we want to bring it up to a different level than that which Europe has shown it, then we must invent and we must make discoveries" (1963: 255). As such, what I offer here is a look at scholarship and projects that invent and discover the theoretical and practical dimensions—or praxis—of decolonization and digital humanities.

First, the stakes of digital humanities—and therefore of decolonization in digital humanities—can only be understood in their local context. Definitions of digital humanities can only be forged by centering the local and displacing the global. Local differences in practices may be best understood through the framework of "accents"—united in a larger system but unique at the level of the local (Risam 2016). Emphasis on the local has been reiterated through the advocacy of Global Outlook::Digital Humanities, a special interest group of the Alliance of Digital Humanities Organizations, which endeavors to break down barriers to international cooperation within digital humanities writ large. Such work emphasizes the situated nature of knowledge (Haraway 1988). Embracing the process of decolonization and the contributions that digital humanities could make requires beginning with the local, the situated, which we find at the level of practice.

Among scholarly conversations that negotiate the local and the global in the contexts of decolonization, postcolonial studies has been prolific. The discursive dimensions of decolonization are readily legible to those familiar with postcolonial theory: European knowledge production has historically been complicit in colonial projects. As Albert Memmi, Edward Said, and Homi Bhabha among others have argued, these products of Europe have played a significant role in the construction of the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized, enforcing the superiority of Europe in relation to its uncivilized Other (Memmi 1965; Said 1978; Bhabha 1991). Yet, there are limits to this approach, as Ali's theory of decolonial computing suggests. One of the major critiques of postcolonial theory, which Ali echoes, is the tendency of its poststructuralist strand to privilege the power of discursive

operations over materialist histories of colonialism (Ahmad 1992; Chibber 2013). Another critique, particularly from scholars in Latin American studies, is that postcolonial studies privileges the operations of British imperialism and extrapolates them for colonialism writ large (Mignolo 1993). Moreover, as Ali and others argue, postcolonial studies derives from continental European philosophy—not the local concerns of the people it purports to represent (Chibber 2013). Nevertheless, the tendency of postcolonial studies toward self-critique and its insistence on foregrounding the particular over the universal—that is to say, the local over the global—keeps alive the possibility of using it in spite of its British or Eurocentric framing; the act of contesting its possibilities for critique are themselves productive and perhaps even transformative.

Yet, a keener look reminds us of the multiplicity of the local beyond dominant national narratives and culture. The U.S., for example, continues to practice settler colonialism. Therefore, decolonization in the U.S. context requires not only the epistemological independence that wa' Thiong'o (1986) describes but also political independence for colonized Native American nations and tribes. The issue of where Indigenous communities fit within the context of decolonization is a critical one when engaging postcolonial theory in a U.S. context, which has analogues for Indigenous Australians as well as First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples in Canada. These national contexts require further exploration of the ways settler colonialism has shaped other nonwhite identities. In the case of the U.S., this requires clearing space for Latinx contributions, documenting African American culture, or pushing back against notions of the Asian model minority.

At stake here is how the definition of “American” has expanded and contracted, granting some the right to the putatively democratic space of the nation but foreclosing it for others. By acknowledging the relationship between settler colonialism and racial politics, we attend to the ways variously other communities have been assimilated into the definition of “whiteness” and those for whom such inclusion is impossible. Moreover, we recognize the historical and ongoing processes of racialization that have sanctioned settler colonialism, authorized Jim Crow, encouraged Islamophobia, and continue to determine immigration policies. In countries ostensibly removed from their histories of colonization, addressing decolonization means acknowledging ongoing legacies of colonialism at the local level. For example, in the United Kingdom this entails attention to postcolonial migrants and their narratives of origin and destination as well as to the effects of state-sanctioned multiculturalism as an ongoing strategy of ambiguity intended to distance the operations of colonialism from the present. These are important issues for digital humanities scholarship to consider in the context of decolonization, and they have been raised by Paul Barrett, who questions the limits of the nation as an analytical category given its implication in state institutions that provide funding (Barrett 2014). Emphasis on the local—a directive of postcolonial studies—demands acknowledgment that there is not a single world or way of being within the world but rather a proliferation of worlds, traditions, and forms of knowledge. These multiplicities only constitute a global dimension insofar as the global is itself diverse and only understood through local particularities.

Where, then, do we find evidence of the intellectual moves within digital humanities that locate decolonization at their center when produced or administered within the Global North? Emerging from Indigenous studies, a number of projects have sought to center Indigenous forms of knowledge and community need in their practice. The Mukurtu Content Management System was developed as a free, open source platform built *with* Indigenous communities to support the development of digital cultural heritage (Mukurtu n.d.).

The project began in response to needs of the Warumungu Aboriginal community in collaboration with Kim Christen and Craig Dietrich. The platform itself enables greater granular control over content than previously existing content management systems, allowing Indigenous communities to exercise cultural protocols for what should be shared and with whom. The idea that information wants to be free has been an influential one in digital humanities, privileging open access to knowledge. Yet, this approach to knowledge is grounded in epistemologies of the Global North. Presuming that freedom of information is a global phenomenon elides the cultural practices of Indigenous communities and the Global South, which often have their own cultural protocols for knowledge transmission. Unlike other content management systems for digital cultural heritage, Mukurtu enables multiple levels of access and privacy to allow communities control over the visibility of objects and artifacts. As such, it marks an important move in decolonizing digital knowledge production because it embeds Indigenous epistemology into its design.

From the perspective of Chicana studies, *Chicana por mi Raza: Uncovering the Hidden History of Chicana Feminism (1965–1985)*, directed by María Cotera and Linda Garcia Merchant, is a digital humanities project intended to preserve the history of Chicana feminist movements in North America (Cotera & Merchant n.d.). The project was developed in collaboration with the Institute for Computing in Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences (I-CHASS) at the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign and is financially supported by the University of Michigan. Despite its institutional moorings, the project is only possible because of the contributions of Chicana women represented in the archive who agreed to be interviewed and to share their personal artifacts from their work as feminist activists. As with many grassroots activist movements, the archives of Chicana feminists are decentralized, often held among the personal effects of the movement's participants. This decentralization poses a barrier to making the archive—and, indeed, the history of Chicana feminist activism—legible for not only historians but also the public. This project represents a community whose activism and engagement in civil rights has long gone unnoticed in historical narratives within the U.S. As a result, the project collects oral histories, posters, correspondence, and other ephemera, with the goal of providing public access to them. By making this unseen history legible, the project participates in decolonizing national narratives of activism by Chicana feminists.

Scholar, artist, and theorist micha cárdenas's work, which focuses on trans of color movements in digital media, is situated in a commitment to decolonization as well. One key example is her work on the *Transborder Immigrant Tool*, which she created as part of the *Electronic Disturbance Theater* (2007). The project repurposes obsolete cellular phone technology to create guidance tools for immigrants crossing the Mexico–U.S. border; these phones direct immigrants to water stations along their journey while also providing them with poetry. The poetry offers not only an aesthetic experience but also survival advice encoded within the poetry. cárdenas's commitments to exploring conditions of the border are also evident in her *Scalar game, Redshift & Portalmetal* (cárdenas 2014). The premise of the game, which combines principles of hypertext with performance, poetry, and film, is that humans have been forced to look beyond the earth for new places to live because of climate change (2014). Through the game, players must consider how dynamics of colonization shape such movement. As players settle on other planets, the game asks them to consider the relationship between space travel and colonization. As settlers, they must further envision new sets of practices that resist settler colonialism. cárdenas's game offers an interactive, online multimedia environment in which players experiment with creating practices of decolonization.

Finally, *Around Digital Humanities in 80 Days*, edited by Alex Gil, demonstrates a strategy of writing back to dominant narratives—in this case, dominant narratives of digital humanities—that privilege the U.S., Canada, and the U.K. in their approach to knowledge production. The project began with Gil’s habit of sending emails describing digital humanities projects around the world and grew into an 80-day series of posts written by Gil and a team of editors. Open and public-facing in design, the original list from which editors selected entries was crowd-sourced, and the diversity of posts intends to foreground the range of what constitutes digital humanities praxis around the world. The resulting map depicting 80 days’ worth of locations offers a challenge to center-based models and maps of digital humanities that depict the U.S. and U.K.—and, to a lesser extent, Canada—as the hotspots of digital humanities around the world. Moreover, the platform itself was built on minimal computing principles and, through its use of the Jekyll platform, is intended to provide quick load times even in low bandwidth environments, making it easily accessible around the world.

What I have offered here is a small sample of the variety of projects that, in their design *and* content, use digital cultural heritage, games, performance art, and mapping in service of decolonization for Indigenous communities, immigrant histories, and the landscape of digital humanities itself. These projects share a commitment to foregrounding that which has traditionally been relegated to the position of subaltern in dominant narratives. They resist hierarchies of knowledge that have emerged from the history and legacies of colonialism, positioning Indigenous, immigrant, and Global South knowledges at their center. Such examples avail themselves to the transformative possibilities of technology while calling attention to the ways that they resist easy answers or simple solutions to the ongoing effects of colonialism and neo-colonialism on the production of knowledge. They embrace the hybridity, plurality, contradiction, and tension that are necessary strategies of decolonization. Innovative and experimental, they are culturally located and make a contribution to our understanding of the global dimensions of digital humanities through intervention at the local level. And, at their heart, they situate the relationship between technology and the human, emphasizing how what it means to be human exists independently from neither the history and legacy of colonialism nor the technologies that made colonialism possible. As a result, the possibilities for decolonization in the scholarly contributions of digital humanities lie in continued resistance, appropriation, and theorization of the relationship between colonialism, technology, and the human.

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