Construction and Disruption
Building Communities of Practice, Queering Subject Liaisons

Caro Pinto

> *In Germany today, not only does the monument vanish, but so too do the traditional notions of the monument's performance. How better to remember forever a vanished people than by the perpetually unfinished, ever-vanishing monument?*

> —James E. Young[1]

SOCIETIES BUILD monuments to remember. Monuments rise to mourn the dead, to commemorate victory in war, and to reflect on injustice. Monuments are meant to influence future behaviors: to wage peace or to bend societies toward justice. Libraries are also memorial environments: many are imposing, glorious brick structures that emulate cathedrals, holding history within their walls. Culturally, we read architectural elements like brick and paned glass as the physical manifestation of the library. At Mount

Holyoke, many students remark that our Reading Room *feels* like a library with its wood beams and bookshelves that invite them to contemplate and study.

While monuments were designed to facilitate collective memory, some enable collective forgetting, like the counter-monuments built in reaction to the bloody wars of the twentieth century.[*] Perhaps the library building's suggestive power has also run its course; libraries are being renovated to facilitate new types of inquiry and research, while notions of "virtual libraries" and "libraries without walls" dominate library design discourse.[†] Monuments and libraries are physical structures but also sets of ideas. Certainly, the work of digital humanities in libraries is not exactly parallel to how monuments instruct us to remember a vanished people or incidents of horrible violence, but memory studies holds lessons for digital humanists. "Doing digital humanities" is a process; it is a set of practices requiring deep engagement with computing, technology, and critical reflection in order to create strategies for positive library futures and engagement with teaching, learning, and scholarship on our campuses and in public discourse.

The Digital Will Not Save You

Literary scholar Murray Roston taught his students at UCLA "every generation faces a system of inherited assumptions and urgent concerns."[2] This generation of librarians faces a system of inherited concerns about the relevance of libraries in the digital era, as well as urgent calls for new training

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[*] James Young's 1992 article in *Critical Inquiry* defined counter-monuments as "brazen, painfully self conscious memorial spaces conceived to challenge the very premises of their being" (James E. Young, "The Counter-Monument: Memory against Itself in Germany Today," *Critical Inquiry* 18, no. 2 [January 1, 1992]: 271). Built to critique the traditional monuments built after World War I that failed to prevent the violence and mass murder of the Second World War, counter-monuments demand that memorial practices extend beyond the construction of a monument.

[†] Hannah Bennett reflected on how perceptions of libraries have shifted from physical entities into ideas in *Art Documentation* in 2013 (Hannah Bennett, "The Psyche of the Library: Physical Space and the Research Paradigm," *Art Documentation* 32, no. 2 [Fall 2013]: 174–85, www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/673511).

and preparation for a rapidly changing job market. How do we stay relevant in a shifting landscape that assumes that to hold steady is anathema to our profession? We celebrate change agents and push for disruption. *New Yorker* writer Jill Lepore reflected on the current embrace of "disruption" as the solution to a variety of challenges: "Everyone is either disrupting or being disrupted…. This fall, the University of Southern California is opening a new program: 'The degree is in disruption,' the university announced. "Disrupt or be disrupted," the venture capitalist Josh Linkner warns in a new book, '… mean[s] that the time has come to panic as you've never panicked before.'"[3]

Academic library discourse also incorporates the language of disruption. The newsletter *Keeping Up With…* , published by the Association of College and Research Libraries, echoes these concerns about relevance, covering topics such as big data, patron-driven acquisitions, and digital humanities.[‡] Indeed, creative destruction drives many of the changes seen in library hiring, retention, space planning, and collections. The tone of these changes ranges from gentle to corrosive.[4] The discourse of creative disruption sometimes suggests that librarians are toiling at empty reference desks in bookless libraries devoid of people. Such libraries are empty, meaningless monuments to knowledge.

The question of disruption and crisis extends to the future of the humanities. Who will save the humanities? "The humanities are in crisis again, or still. But there is one big exception: digital humanities, which is a growth industry," wrote Adam Kirsch in *The Atlantic*.[5] Are the digital humanities the disruptor-savior for traditional libraries? If so, how should librarians at smaller, teaching-oriented institutions develop digital humanities programs and services? At Mount Holyoke College, we took inspiration from

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[‡]   The Association of College and Research Libraries describes the *Keeping Up With…* newsletter series as "an online current awareness publication from the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) featuring concise briefs on trends in academic librarianship and higher education. Each edition focuses on a single issue including an introduction to the topic and summaries of key points, including implications for academic libraries" (ACRL, "Keeping Up With… ," accessed October 25, 2014, www.ala.org/acrl/publications/keeping_up_with). For more information, visit the website.

a symposium that started conversations about how to build digital humanities communities of practice. The event, held in May 2013, was organized under the auspices of the Five College Consortium, a network of institutions in western Massachusetts: Amherst College, Hampshire College, Mount Holyoke College, Smith College, and the University of Massachusetts Amherst.[6] The day taught us about the importance of flexibility and the value of archival materials, collaboration, and administrative support. While the symposium aimed to address these questions at a consortial level, individual institutional participants pondered how to enact local changes. Our cross-functional group at Mount Holyoke College, now called RAD (Research and Instructional Support, Archives and Special Collections, and Digital Assets and Preservation), coalesced organically outside of traditional organizational lines. RAD actively engages with projects that meet college learning goals and objectives, especially those that speak to the intersection of technology and the traditional liberal arts. We do not interact in compartmentalized spaces, but over coffee in the library atrium, in a classroom trying to boot a circa 2000 iMac, or in a windowless conference room nudging cascading style sheets toward their rightful place in a digital exhibition. Our community of practice at Mount Holyoke was not built from the top down; it is project-based and student-focused, blessed by our administration to support curricular engagement and to ensure that our graduates are ready for the disruption-happy world they are inheriting. In the words of Johanna Drucker, "the *next* university… is a fully integrated and distributed platform" evolved from "monastic centers" and laboratory cum industrial incubator.[7] Guerilla digital humanities groups, task forces, projects, and teams are crucial steps toward realizing the "*next* university."

It Takes a Village to Build a Digital Project

Many humanists worship at the altar of the individual creative genius, believing that their best work is completed without the assistance of anyone else. Indeed, as journalist Joshua Wolf Shenk argues, "the idea of the solitary creator is such a common feature of our cultural landscape (as with Newton and the falling apple) that we easily forget it's an idea in the first place."[8] Indeed, many humanities projects—particularly live or recorded

music or theatrical productions—require the talents of many individuals. Digital humanities projects also shatter the myth of the solitary genius in that they depend upon the sustained collaboration of multiple people with diverse expertise. They are often the direct result of sustained collaborative vision, resource development, and time management. It takes a village to build a digital project. Projects like One Week | One Tool illustrate how digital projects are impossible to build without robust teams, support for those teams, and teamwork to collaborate effectively. Indeed, One Week | One Tool is a self-described barn raising.§ These communities organize themselves to construct the technical foundations, critical content, and public discourse that propels and sustains their projects. These dynamic communities of practice evolve to meet the demands of the present, disappearing and reappearing to meet new challenges.

The humanities may not have been originally imagined to be group endeavors, but the work of the digital demands a sum greater than one part. Faculty, librarians, archivists, and technologists must collaborate.[9] Libraries must also find ways to better facilitate cross-department, cross-functional organization in addition to forging new types of relationships with faculty. Some organizations are evolving to meet this challenge. Research universities like the University of Florida and Michigan State have reorganized themselves to better facilitate digital projects. As Laurie Taylor and Blake Landor note of Florida: "The Digital Humanities Library Group was created without a specific charge other than to address/discuss issues in digital humanities and to schedule training in support of the group's members. While the formation of the group was approved by Library Administration… it is very much a grassroots cohort of primarily Subject or Liaison Librarians brought together by a common interest."[10]

Thomas Padilla described the Michigan State University Digital Scholarship Collaborative, noting that "Direct ties to subject areas combined

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§   The website of the One Week | One Tool project relates its mission to barn raisings: "For centuries rural communities throughout the United States have come together for 'barn raisings' when one of their number required the diverse set of skills and enormous effort required to build a barn—skills and effort no one member of the community alone could possess" (One Week | One Tool homepage, accessed October 25, 2014, http://oneweekonetool.org).

with appointments to other parts of the library strengthens our ability to be effective with respect to collection preparation to support computational analysis, communicating principles of data curation, and staying informed about needs of the campus community."[11] Indeed, these examples of cross-department, cross-functional organization are on the rise within libraries. They are working to meet evolving scholarly needs and to enlist many different library constituents to support digital humanities initiatives. This kind of nimble group structure engages digital technology to facilitate new directions in the humanities.

Digital humanities centers at research universities employ faculty and staff that can scale up to meet complex demands and have a population of graduate students to help with the challenging work of enacting these changes. What does digital humanities look like on a smaller scale at a teaching institution? How can smaller colleges do digital humanities? According to William Pannapacker of Hope College, these institutions hold special advantages: "Because of their teaching focus… faculty members are more likely to be able to experiment with projects that may not lead to traditional scholarly publications. Some liberal arts colleges even have a culture of faculty-student collaborative research, which translates perfectly into the project-building methods of the digital humanities."[12] Small liberal arts colleges may lack larger budgets, flashy centers, and an army of graduate students, but they do have agile pathways for incorporating digital humanities into their curricula and job descriptions. In many ways, liberal arts colleges are ripe for DH innovations in staffing, collaborations, and the primacy of student-directed work.

If You Fund It, They Will Come

The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation has funded several liberal arts college digital humanities initiatives, including the Tri-Co Digital Humanities Initiative (Tri-Co DH), Five Colleges, Incorporated (5CollDH), and Hamilton College. In the Five Colleges, Mellon's funding fosters new collaborations and encouragement for faculty to incorporate the digital into the curriculum. As the website states, "Five College Digital Humanities provides grants and training to, as well as encourages, faculty members within the

consortium to incorporate digital technologies into humanities studies and student research. From 2011 to 2015, 5CollDH will fund faculty and staff through our collaborative grants program, and groups of students through our student fellowship program."[13] One of the central questions for librarians in the consortium has been this: How do we participate? How can librarians be change makers and active agents in these digital projects? In the Five Colleges, librarians wanted to make substantial contributions to this growing endeavor. To integrate the "digital" into the curriculum would require sustained collaboration between librarians, technologists, and faculty. Librarians wondered how to begin tackling this task across the campuses to transform the digital humanities from an abstraction into an actionable set of practices.

The libraries in the Five College Consortium are autonomous, but collaborate in meaningful ways with a shared integrated library system, a shared depository, and reciprocal lending among all five campuses. The libraries also collaborate administratively with committees, task forces, and working groups. One such committee was the Digital Environment Development and Coordinating Committee (DEDCC), which scanned the horizon to help librarians understand future challenges and opportunities. During the 2012–13 school year, DEDCC engaged in exploratory conversations about how to collaborate with faculty and students to "do" digital humanities in the Five Colleges. The group decided to sponsor a symposium whose goal was "to provide a starting place for librarians and IT staff at the Five Colleges to learn about and explore research and scholarship in the Digital Humanities in liberal arts settings. The symposium included a panel followed by breakout sessions to explore topics around the broad question '*What does it take to become an effective digital humanities community of practice in the Five Colleges?*'"[14]

Imagining a Community of Practice

The DEDCC librarians solicited proposals nationally to help the group reflect on what it would take to become an effective community of practice. The committee selected speakers to represent a variety of perspectives: Joanne Schneider, library director at Colgate University; Laura McGrane,

a faculty member at Haverford College; Jen Rajchel, a post-baccalaureate resident for the Tri-Co DH Initiative (at Haverford, Swarthmore, and Bryn Mawr Colleges); Laurie Allen at Haverford, who had transformed from a traditional reference and instruction librarian into Digital Scholarship Coordinator; Alston Brake, the very first Digital Scholarship Librarian at Washington and Lee University; and Brandon Bucy, an Academic Technologist at Washington and Lee. Each speaker saw changes in their titles and responsibilities to meet new challenges presented by the digital humanities. The panels were excellent object lessons in how to transform libraries to meet the evolving needs of digital scholarship in small organizations. Often, these transformations were accomplished without adding new positions, which is always a challenge in waging organizational change.

The 5CollDH event was a one-day symposium that began with the usual mix of coffee and mingling followed by presentations from invited speakers and discussions of digital scholarship. Following lunch, the group of archivists, librarians, instructional technologists, and administrators broke out for an "unconference" of active conversations, brainstorming, and small-group exercises. What might work at Colgate or Haverford or Washington and Lee would not necessarily work at Smith, Mount Holyoke, Hampshire, Amherst, or the University of Massachusetts, so the afternoon's work session was intended to envision DH in the local context. Armed with a range of brightly colored sticky notes, pens, and enthusiasm, participants went to work brainstorming about how to facilitate a DH community of practice in the Five Colleges.

Active facilitation of these conversations was key to identifying themes and ideas that resonated across and within libraries and units. In unconference mode, participants voted on the top priorities within their groups. Themes included budgets, "special collections," "updated position descriptions," and "compelling vision." Soon, participants covered the white butcher paper with many brightly colored sticky notes. Following the conclusion of that exercise, facilitators began grouping the Post-it notes together in themes: relationships, communication, funding, skills, definitions of DH, and creating an inventory of 5CollDH projects. Groups gathered around butcher paper to meditate on these themes. Eventually,

facilitators provided orange dots for participants to use in voting on common themes that emerged to help work toward the goal of defining our community of practice. Themes emerged, such as "who else is working on an area of interest," "who is this for," "common set of principles." Once the votes were tallied, the facilitators compiled the results to act as action steps for the committee to consider for future programming. While the consortial perspective was critical for the success of the event, the local context was equally critical for our day-to-day work. We also considered how we would do digital humanities at our individual campuses. The facilitated discussions were excellent, but raised additional questions: How could we bring these conversations into our local institutional contexts? How should we create working groups on our campuses and beyond to integrate this work into our existing practices?

An opportunity to do digital humanities at Mount Holyoke College soon presented itself. The professor of the first-year connections course, a one-credit course designed to acclimate first-year students to college learning, approached the college archivist about an assignment focusing on college traditions. The objective was to inculcate first-year students with a sense of Mount Holyoke history and to allow them to learn about the traditions that make Mount Holyoke College unique. We eventually decided to create a digital exhibit that incoming students and their families could view and enjoy before they arrived on campus. The exhibit would also serve the library as a large-scale teaching tool, engaging a variety of students over the long term. And so began the first iteration of RAD: Research and Instructional Support, Archives and Special Collections, and Digital Assets and Preservation Services.

A Cross-Functional Community at Mount Holyoke

One subject liaison, one metadata librarian, or one archivist cannot play hero to the digital humanities endeavor. In our case at Mount Holyoke, we recognized that our cohort would take the form of working groups formed under the charge of producing certain projects. Our cohort coalesced in an informal but powerful way. In one example, we built an Omeka site for

the first-year seminars program to empower new students to transition to college and cultivate resilience in a new community. The Omeka site would not have been possible without the collaborative efforts of everyone involved in the project, especially the students who were at the center of the research, development, and deployment stages.

Our cross-functional work is not a monument to digital scholarship or to collaboration; we fully expect that our working group will evolve to meet new challenges and reflect constructively on past work. We organized new configurations of people to attend to new tasks, but we recognized the impermanence of these configurations and our need to be open to shifting responsibilities. Positions in libraries cannot be monuments to the past or to the already completed work of other people. Libraries themselves cannot simply be static monuments to past work; we cannot rely on grand architecture to remind our funders and our constituents to care about the future of libraries in higher education. While we must remember our past to understand our present and plan for the future, we need to be nimble and sensitive to local organizational contexts.

Cross-Functional Individuals: Queering the Subject Librarian

If this generation of librarians must choose between disrupting and being disrupted, there are exciting possibilities ahead for us. Today's information professionals can disrupt the information professional binary that divides librarians and archivists, subject liaisons and metadata librarians. These binaries obscure the remarkable commonalities and complementary skill sets that make academic library communities stronger, nimbler, and ready for future challenges. Successful digital humanities work depends upon effective cross-functional collaboration. I readily and enthusiastically identify as a *librarchivist*; a franken-professional who is part archivist and special collections professional and part librarian, heir of information, collection development, instruction, and liaison to faculty, curriculum, and student research needs. While my professional identity as a "specialized generalist" empowers me to participate in a range of conversations and projects,

I recognize that I need the expertise and skills of my community of allies and collaborators. Ideas that can shape our scholarly future can come from any of us. Can they come from you? We should disrupt toward solidarity and innovate toward communities of practice in the digital humanities. These communities have the potential for positive, lasting disruption in the academy, as Roxanne Shirazi has argued: "Let's join our colleagues who are struggling with the narrow system of rewards that favors individual research over (collaborative) service work. The same system in which women, people of color, and queer scholars disproportionately shoulder the burden of committee work, community building, and 'service work' that reproduces the academy."[15] If the library of the past was a monument to the past, perhaps digital humanities can create a counter-monument, disrupting the landscape towards a new future.

Notes

1. James E. Young, "The Counter-Monument: Memory against Itself in Germany Today," *Critical Inquiry* 18, no. 2 (January 1, 1992): 271.
2. Murray Roston, quoted in Natasha Vargas-Cooper, *Mad Men Unbuttoned: A Romp through 1960s America* (New York: Collins Design, 2010), xii.
3. Jill Lepore, "The Disruption Machine," *New Yorker*, June 30, 2014, accessed February 4, 2015, http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/06/23/the-disruption-machine.
4. Caro Pinto, "Creative Destruction in Libraries: Designing Our Future," *In the Library with the Lead Pipe* (blog), November 20, 2013, www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2013/creative-destruction-in-libraries-designing-our-future.
5. Adam Kirsch, "Technology Is Taking Over English Departments: The False Promise of the Digital Humanities," *New Republic*, May 2, 2014, www.newrepublic.com/article/117428/limits-digital-humanities-adam-kirsch.
6. Five College Consortium home page, accessed October 25, 2014, https://www.fivecolleges.edu.
7. Johanna Drucker, "The University as a Fully Integrated and Distributed Platform: A Vision," *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 14, no. 3 (2014): 326.
8. Joshua Wolf Shenk, "The End of 'Genius,'" Sunday Review, *New York Times*, July 19, 2014, www.nytimes.com/2014/07/20/opinion/sunday/the-end-of-genius.html.
9. Caro Pinto, "Digital Humanities Is a Team Sport: Thoughts on #DHTNG," *dh + lib* (blog), April 10, 2013, http://acrl.ala.org/dh/2013/04/10/digital-humanities-is-a-team-sport-thoughts-on-dhtng.

10. Laurie Taylor and Blake Landor, "Intertwingularity with Digital Humanities at the University of Florida," *dh + lib* (blog), July 23, 2014, http://acrl.ala.org/dh/2014/07/23/intertwingularity-digital-humanities-university-florida.

11. Thomas Padilla, "Digital Humanities Librarianship: Year 1," *Thomas Padilla* (blog), July 13, 2014, www.thomaspadilla.org/2014/07/13/digital-humanities-librarianship-year-one.

12. William Pannapacker, "Stop Calling It 'Digital Humanities,'" *Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 18, 2013, http://chronicle.com/article/Stop-Calling-It-Digital/137325.

13. Five College Digital Humanities, "About" page, accessed July 30, 2014, http://5colldh.org/about.

14. Digital Humanities for Liberal Arts Colleges Symposium home page, accessed July 30, 2014, https://sites.google.com/a/mtholyoke.edu/digital-humanities-for-liberal-arts-colleges-symposium.

15. Roxanne Shirazi, "Reproducing the Academy: Librarians and the Question of Service in the Digital Humanities," *Roxanne Shirazi* (blog), July 15, 2014, http://roxanneshirazi.com/2014/07/15/reproducing-the-academy-librarians-and-the-question-of-service-in-the-digital-humanities.

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