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Simon Burrows and Glenn Roe, eds. *Digitizing Enlightenment: Digital Humanities and the Transformation of Eighteenth-Century Studies*. Oxford University Studies in the Enlightenment 7. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020. 472 pp. Figures, tables, bibliography, and index. £65.00 U.K. (eb). ISBN 9781789621945; £65.00 U.K. (eb). ISBN 9781800345454.

Review by Hélène E. Bilis Wellesley College.

Given the scope of what the terms “Digital Humanities” and “Enlightenment” cover, it is not surprising that a collaborative volume devoted to “digitizing Enlightenment” composed of fourteen essays, in addition to a preface by Keith Michael Baker, an introduction by the editors, and a conclusion by Sean Takats, should vary widely in its tone and objectives. Although the introduction hints at the “sometimes-painful lessons learned in the process” (p. 2), Burrows and Roe applaud the “remarkable and interrelated intellectual and digital projects that are transforming the way we view the history and culture of the eighteenth century” (p. 1). They praise the field of digital humanities (DH) for “allowing us to see patterns and relationships that were hitherto hard to discern, and to pinpoint, visualize and analyze relevant data in efficient and powerful new ways” (p. 1). The celebratory tone of the introduction, however, is tempered in many of the essays that follow. Despite the great accomplishments of the digital projects described, such as the ARTFL *Encyclopédie*, the Electronic Enlightenment, the Mapping the Republic of Letters project, the Early Modern Letters Online database, or the Mediate project, the essays themselves prove to be less upbeat, pointing explicitly to the setbacks, costs, and headaches that stem from scholarly investments in DH.

No essay is more open about the hurdles inherent to DH projects than Jeffrey Ravel’s on the Comédie-Française Registers Project. He states, candidly: “Don’t try this at home, or if you do be sure you have ample reserves of time, money and patience” (p. 135). Ravel, articulating concerns heard throughout the volume, evokes the “tensions around the project” related to identifying an audience and to moving the project along (p. 134). He also provides a welcome dose of reality with his cautionary words: “The seamless narrative that you find below belies the endless stops and starts, failures and triumphs, and general anxiety that appear to be an inevitable part of any digital humanities project” (p. 135). This recurring point regarding the frustrations and setbacks of digital projects echoes the introduction to another, related DH volume of Ravel’s, in which he describes learning that all the contributor essays submitted had been inadvertently deleted from a server and not backed up.[1]

The fourteen collected essays in *Digitizing Enlightenment* are part reflection papers, part project history, part sharing of results that have emerged from each team’s particular DH project. Angus

Martin and the late Richard Frautschi, who have been working on digital analyses of literary history since the early 1980s, write of “the pleasures and miseries” (p. 158) of attempting large scale digital research: challenges that stem mainly from the unreliability of data and the difficulties inherent to producing sharable datasets, applicable to other projects. Dan Edelstein describes feelings of being “deflated” (p. 73) when faced with the immense tasks required to get DH projects off the ground and emphasizes that without the essential contributions of a reliable “tech expert,” who “offered copious amounts of her time” (p. 76)—in this case, Nicole Coleman of the Stanford Humanities Center and a team of computer science MA students—the acclaimed Mapping the Republic of Letters project likely would not have moved forward.

Beyond the specific insights of the individual essays related to a broad conception of Enlightenment history, the volume’s cumulative effect is to sensitize readers to the nonlinearity of DH undertakings. The essays attest to the always half-realized project, the inevitable process of trial and error, and the frustration of hitting walls, be they walls of technical or quantitative expertise or walls due to questionable or missing data, not to mention personnel issues. Regarding the latter subject, the volume could have done more, especially in its introduction and structure, to better acknowledge and represent the “group” aspects of these group projects. For instance, it would have been wise not to separate part one of the volume where nine men and only one woman, Alicia C. Montoya (listed last), employed at some of the world’s most prestigious and wealthy institutions, give the account of their projects. Instead of embracing the collective mentality and Alt-Ac partnerships that DH studies have fostered, the volume adopts a decidedly traditional hierarchical structure, seemingly oblivious to the field’s calls to diversify DH studies, foreground collaborations and cite the unheralded labor of subject and information specialists, graduate students, and tech experts. [2] The established (mostly male) authors speak for their projects, and then the (mostly female) research associates, technology specialists, more junior scholars, and librarians are grouped together in part two, “Digital Methods and Innovations,” to offer case studies. Although some of the volume’s most compelling essays reside in part two (such as an analysis of eighteenth-century salon membership by Melanie Conroy and Chloe Summers Edmondson), the flawed hierarchical structure comes across as surprisingly unimaginative. In part one, only Howard Hotson foregrounds his team and uses the first-person plural; but surprisingly for an essay titled “Cultures of Knowledge in Transition: Early Modern Letters Online as an Experiment in Collaboration, 2009–2018,” only his name appears in the table of contents.

Sean Takats’s gesture towards recognizing the unheralded labor involved in DH projects in the volume’s conclusion, “Beyond Digitizing Enlightenment,” is too understated, or too idealistic, in addressing what exactly the process of digitizing large-scale archives entails: “The menial work of digital history reminds us that the best research also engages our hands” (p. 381). Yes, more and more archival materials are being digitized and therefore providing more access to some materials; but recognition of the financial, institutional, and geographic impediments that divide those who work to digitize large-scale corpuses or clean data, versus those who participate meaningfully in DH projects and receive financial and symbolic rewards for them, is missing as part of an overarching concern. When Morrissey and Roe describe turning to non-Francophone contractors in China to conduct the initial data entry of the *Encyclopédie* (p. 38) and later using automated procedures to crossreference authors, articles, etc., they devote little reflection to the ethics of such endeavors. Similarly, Nicolas Cronk’s description of the Electronic Enlightenment projects neglects to attribute agency to the labor of preparing the database of letters, as if this accumulation of data were appearing on its own: “As of winter 2018–2019, EE now contains some

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79,000 letters from over 10,000 correspondents, making it the most wide-ranging online collection of edited correspondence of the early modern period, linking people across Europe, the Americas, and Asia [...]. As the database continues to grow, so too does the range of questions we are able to ask of the new resource” (p. 70).

Databases don't grow on their own, and perhaps the lack of an acknowledgements section for the volume is what makes such language jarring. It is striking that Elizabeth Andrews Bond and Robert M. Bond, in their exploratory essay on “Topic Modeling the French Pre-Revolutionary Press,” are alone in devoting a section of their essay to thank students for “their assistance in preparing text files for analysis” (p. 276). This is not to say that such questions are entirely ignored; they simply deserved more foregrounding. Jeffrey Ravel stands out for his willingness to address such issues frontally. He describes the crowdsourcing efforts undertaken by a Université de Nantes team working on a DH project related to the Comédie-Italienne, a project whose principle investigators have opted to train data entry volunteers from the general public: nonacademics who might undertake the tasks usually reserved to undergraduate and graduate students, although in this case without any compensation, but with the goal of assisting historical research. As Ravel puts it: “Is it fair for the Nantes team to rely on unpaid labour to create a database that will serve its own scholarly and professional agendas? Are they, in effect, leveraging their cultural and technological capital to profit from anonymous collaborators who are excited by the prospect of aiding historical research but will remain uncompensated for their efforts?” (pp. 149-50). Ravel questions this model and, implicitly, DH models in general, asking if such crowdsourcing and reliance on free labor is not “undermining the Western humanistic tradition as embodied in our institutions of higher education” (p. 150). In a volume devoted to such high-profile, well-funded, and large-scale projects related to Enlightenment studies, more consideration of these kinds of questions would have been welcome. After all, project ideas may be born equal, but DH labs are not.

A recurring theme of the volume is that so much of DH work entails coming up with creative solutions for dealing with the “data deluge” and the “sense of overabundance and overload” (p. 29) that stems from DH projects. Just like Diderot and D'Alembert's initial excitement at the idea of ordering all knowledge gave way to a sense of the “monstrosity” (p. 30) and unwieldy nature of such an undertaking—a discovery that led to their decision to alphabetize entries, an innovation of the eighteenth century—the researchers all describe grappling with how to sort through and organize the mountains of data associated with their projects. In their account of the inception of the ARTFL *Encyclopédie* project, Robert Morrissey and Glen Roe trace the history of their collaboration (which began in 1982), describe the hurdles they have faced, and contemplate the tasks that still await. In describing the daunting challenges of digitizing the *Encyclopédie*, they reflect productively on what the process of moving from the book form to the digital format has revealed. Instances such as these, reflections on what is lost or changed when leaving the printed form or archive for the digital realm, are the most insightful. For example, despite Diderot and D'Alembert's claims to an overarching organizational structure, the first evidence that emerges in the process of digitization is the lack of a systematic presentation and inventory by the eighteenth-century authors: be it in the article headwords, in the classifications or cross-references, relations between articles and plates—things that are crucial to tagging and linking in the digital realm—nothing is straightforward.

Morrissey and Roe admit that they cannot achieve a perfectly completed scholarly edition of such an immense work, and that a digital version could never be a “facsimile of the print edition” nor

even a surrogate piece to the “real” printed edition (p. 38). Instead, the goal for the digital *Encyclopédie* was to “reflect both the letter of the work and the critical spirit in which it was written” (p. 38). This point is important and repeated across essays. DH work participates in “the dialectic of research and development” (p. 51). For example, the digital *Encyclopédie* has led to the creation of the full-text search, retrieval and analysis system known as PhiloLogic 4” (p. 51); and more broadly, the digital versions become “living editions and important virtual laboratories in which to experiment with the next generation of computational tools and methods” (p. 51).

The essays take readers through the winding paths of DH projects, describing the challenges guiding the participants’ decision-making at almost every step. We rarely read such narratives in non-DH research, although I daresay those would be revelatory as well; but the problems of accessibility, missing data, navigability, and editorial protocols make them impossible to separate from the resulting conclusions of DH research. Projects become test beds and ongoing experiments, rather than self-contained scholarly arguments in a traditional sense. Despite Simon Burrows’s deep engagement with, and rebuttal of, Robert Darnton’s critique of the French Book Trade in Enlightenment Europe (FBTEE) database project (pp. 177-88), most of the essays foreground the methodological issues and steps taken to overcome roadblocks rather than present a new thesis on the Enlightenment. Sharing data and then linking it, defining a corpus, standardizing queries, understanding the idiosyncrasies of various search engines and digital tools, and meticulously planning databases is what “digitizing the Enlightenment” really means. I do not say this disparagingly, quite the contrary: these are enormous feats that have allowed utopic visions of future research to flourish in imagining datasets that might speak to each other someday and would enable new kinds of collaborations between project teams. Burrows writes that although there is still much progress to be made, “The dream of a single linked open data research environment through which we can explore at once the production, reception, ownership, marketing, policing and transmission of books across time and space is an enticing one. This is the ultimate aspiration of the FBTEE team and the revolution in scholarship in which it is participating” (p. 194).

It is heartening, therefore, that researchers who have spent so many years solving questions around how best to mine text files and deploring the lack of standardization in libraries continue to hold out hope for the value of shared databases. I would have welcomed more thoughts on the problems inherent to working between different languages when seeking to “digitize the Enlightenment.” (Alicia Montoya is the only one to highlight the difficulty of the linguistic issue.) Yet I came away with newfound appreciation for the conceptual work that happens in establishing a database and the intellectual feat of generating data from sources that were never intended for computational analysis. It is clear that anyone embarking on a DH project, be it large- or small-scale, would do well to read this volume carefully before they begin.

#### LIST of ESSAYS

Keith Michael Baker, “Preface”

Simon Burrows and Glenn Roe, “Introduction: Digitizing Enlightenment”

Robert Morrissey and Glenn Roe, “The ARTFL *Encyclopédie* and the Aesthetics of Abundance”

Nicholas Cronk, “Electronic Enlightenment: Recreating the Republic of Letters”

Dan Edelstein, "Mapping the Republic of Letters: History of a Digital Humanities Project"

Howard Hotson, "Cultures of Knowledge in Transition: Early Modern Letters Online as an Experiment in Collaboration, 2009-2018"

Jeffrey S. Ravel, "The Comédie-Française Registers Project: Questions of Audience"

Angus Martin and Richard Frautschi, "Towards a New Bibliography of Eighteenth-Century French Fiction"

Simon Burrows, "The FBTEE Revolution Mapping the Ancien Régime Book Trade and the Future of Historical Bibliometric Research"

Alicia C. Montoya, "Shifting Perspectives and Moving Targets: From Conceptual Vistas to Bits of Data in the First Year of the MEDiate Project"

Catherine Nicole Coleman, "Seeking the Eye of History: The Design of Digital Tools for Enlightenment Studies"

Elizabeth Andrews Bond and Robert M. Bond, "Topic Modelling the French Pre-Revolutionary Press"

Katherine McDonough, "Putting the Eighteenth Century on the Map: French Geospatial Data for Digital Humanities Research"

Laure Philip, "The Illegal Book Trade Revisited: An Insight into Database Protocols and Pitfalls"

Melanie Conroy and Chloe Summers Edmondson, "The Empire of Letters: Enlightenment-Era French Salons"

Clovis Gladstone and Charles Cooney, "Opening New Paths for Scholarship: Algorithms to Track Text Reuse in Eighteenth Century Collections Online"

Sean Takats, "Conclusion: Beyond Digitizing Enlightenment"

## NOTES

[1] Ravel and his coeditor, Sylvaine Guyot, discovered that the "online essays had inadvertently been erased and, astonishingly, the private vendor providing the platform to the Press had not backed them up." See "Introduction: Histoire du théâtre et humanités numériques," in *Données, recettes et répertoire: La scène en ligne (1680-1793)*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. Published online by MIT Press at <https://doi.org/10.21428/671d579e.e139b5e7>.

[2] On recognizing DH research partnerships, see, for example, Roxanne Shirazi, "Reproducing the Academy: Librarians and the Question of Service in the Digital Humanities," Personal Blog. Accessible at <http://roxanneshirazi.com/2014/07/15/reproducing-the-academy-librarians-and-the-question-of-service-in-the-digital-humanities>; and Alix Keener, "The Arrival Fallacy:

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Collaborative Research Relationships in the Digital Humanities,” *Digital Humanities Quarterly* 9.2 (2015). Accessible at <http://www.digitalhumanities.org/dhq/vol/9/2/000213/000213.html>.

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