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## PRECARIOUS LABOR AND RADICAL CARE IN LIBRARIES AND DIGITAL HUMANITIES

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I want there to be a diversity of care tactics. And I want everyone to be able to create wildly intimate, healing relationships where your care needs are present in the room, not crammed in the garbage. I want everyone to have access to this joyful, dangerous, wide-open pleasure, because it's the vulnerable strength we all deserve.

—Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha

### SETTING THE STAGE

Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic write, “Unlike some academic disciplines, Critical Race Theory contains an activist dimension. It not only tries to understand our social situation, but to change it; it sets out not only to ascertain how society organizes itself along racial lines and hierarchies, but to transform it for the better” (2001, 3). In this chapter, we attempt to combine this activist mode of Critical Race Theory (CRT) with Third World feminisms and feminist antiracist praxis into a discussion of labor in academic libraries. In doing so, we are seeking to critique and unpack systemic structures to change them together. We want to effect change that is imbued with the “creativity, power, wit, and humanity of the voices speaking about ways to change that structure” (Harris 2001, xx). This is especially important when we consider that “librarianship has feigned political and social neutrality while exploiting the labor of those who exist outside the spectrum of white, able-bodied, cis-gender, neurotypical-ness that so many working librarians occupy” (Brown et al. 2018, 163). To focus this chapter, we use digital humanities positions in academia

as a case study to examine the systemic and structural issues that have led to the current state of precarious and contingent labor in libraries, especially for librarians of color. We focus here on digital humanities librarianship, providing extensive background on its more recent formations, the critiques that have emerged, and its corollaries, not only because of our own situatedness and proximity to the field, but because of the significance of the field, where we have seen increasing allocations of resources, space, and positions for the support of such work. The trends we see in digital humanities, we argue, portend troubling developments that reverberate across librarianship more broadly.

The trends we have identified that link digital humanities and librarianship include characterizations of both fields as inclusive, “nice,” or “neutral,” while they are targeted with critiques of whiteness perpetuated by exclusionary politics, policies, and daily practices. Efforts in both digital humanities and librarianship to address the issue of overwhelming whiteness have included a number of initiatives to diversify the fields, which have been largely unsuccessful and instead only revealed the prevalent homophily and consequent homogeneity in both domains. These efforts have included different kinds of competitive short-term appointments (resident librarians, fellowships, postdocs, among others), all instantiations of precarious labor, many of which, however, also remain limited to US citizens and permanent residents; efforts to increase the talent pipeline from graduate programs into the profession; and conferences or workshops that sometimes end up further segregating the profession (though some are specifically designed to establish safe spaces for dialogue and collectivism). In some cases, these programs have had complicated effects on individuals, and more broadly in the profession. Using the CRT method of storytelling and counterstorytelling to situate this chapter, we start with our own experiences in an attempt at a “working identity” within the space of an academic library as Brown digital humanities-adjacent librarians who have occupied a range of roles in and outside of libraries in support of digital humanities work (Carbado and Gulati 2000).<sup>1</sup> As Richard Delgado writes, “Stories told by underdogs” can be powerful because they “can shatter complacency and challenge the status quo” (1989, 2414). More importantly, counterstorytelling does this work by drawing attention to the “ridiculous, self-serving, or cruel,” thereby deconstructing those structures, proposing alternatives, and helping us to “understand when it is time to reallocate power” (2415).

We write these words as librarians and faculty who have been beneficiaries of these same initiatives. Having suffered from job contingency, financial stresses, racial microaggressions, and the vagaries of the immigration system, we are very much

aware of our own positionalities as South and Southeast Asian/American librarians. We're the Brown Asians whose identities are outside of the Black-white binary. Borrowing from Claire Jean Kim, we are triangulated and "Othered" as more inferior than white populations, less inferior than Black ones, and more foreign than both. Although we are outside of the neat Black-white binary, we are never outside of the structures determined by whiteness. We also came to librarianship via rather irregular trajectories as PhDs who intentionally chose to pursue academic careers that value knowledge making and community-centered service. Anne has a PhD in English, was a postdoctoral fellow in transnational cultural studies, and then coordinated a digital liberal arts program in an "alternative academic" or "alt-ac" (read: non-tenure-track faculty) position from within a library at a small liberal arts college. Kush holds a PhD in architecture, was a postdoctoral fellow in two humanities centers, and was a public humanities graduate fellow at a large R1 university. We both found ourselves working as academic librarians supporting digital scholarship and pedagogy at a prominent and historically white research university in the Midwest. Our distinct careers in digital and public humanities brought us together to collaboratively advance and sustain a bottom-up infrastructure for digital humanities scholarship at a massive resource-rich academic library.

Although our introduction to each other would be important to our own identity and community formation as immigrant South and Southeast Asian/American digital humanities-adjacent librarians, we also would come to encounter many obstacles that would test this newfound relationship, most importantly around an inflexible immigration system that is built on White Supremacist ideologies and structures. For us as feminist of color librarians committed to equitable labor, radical care, and social justice, this process has been a difficult one, filled with silences, absences, erasures, and quiet traumas that span a spectrum from forced leaves of absence to international displacement. These experiences are not unique, but they help us to reevaluate more critically what Sara Ahmed calls our "relationship to institutional worlds" (2012, 5). They are the intentional result of legacies of historically racist systems and structures meant to make it easier for certain populations to immigrate and enter the fold of the US body politic, and more difficult for others. This chapter attempts to focus attention on the intersectional complexities of race, gender, sexuality, and immigration status as they affect the lives of librarians with PhDs whose positions support digital humanities work. We draw parallels between libraries and the digital humanities as fields that have struggled with issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion, while also being characterized as "nice." We will utilize Ahmed's critique of diversity work to

identify the paradoxes of doing and *being* diversity in digital humanities and libraries. We will close by highlighting alternative action, based on adrienne maree brown's *Pleasure Activism*, where she urges us "to learn how to practice love such that care—for ourselves and others—is understood as political resistance and cultivating resilience" (2019, 59), to help those in positions of power to support feminist anticolonial and antiracist praxis that is more inclusive, human-centered, equitable, and pleasurable, within their own libraries or digital humanities programs. We find that despite these difficult experiences brought on by our identities in White Supremacist structures, there is also the opportunity for positive things to emerge that can be made real only through our commitments to each other. As Gloria Ladson-Billings writes, "It is because of the meaning and value imputed to whiteness that CRT becomes an important intellectual and social tool for deconstruction, reconstruction, and construction: deconstruction of oppressive structures, reconstruction of human agency, and construction of equitable and socially just relations of power" (1998, 9). Based on this premise, we propose practical steps to reimagining labor in digital humanities and libraries that uplifts, rather than exhausts and excludes, librarians of color.

## INTERSECTIONALITY AND JURIDICAL IDENTITIES

In recent decades, *intersectionality* has been somewhat of a popular buzzword taken up in feminist theory and applied to any number of analyses (Bilge 2013; Cooper 2015).<sup>2</sup> It would seem to be particularly applicable here as we write of being racialized bodies in libraries, spaces that have been documented as primarily white and female. As numerous studies, presentations, and publications have noted, "The library profession is amply aware that White librarians are over-represented among its workers" (Brook, Ellenwood, and Lazzarro 2015, 261). In a white paper published for the Association of College and Research Libraries in 2007, the authors contextualized current labor dynamics within a longer US history, writing, "Academic librarianship recruitment history cannot be divorced from the history of education and federal education policy in the United States," a history that included racism, segregation, discrimination, Indian schools, forced assimilation, and a litany of other injustices (Neely and Peterson 2007, 8). Likewise, we have seen similar questions being raised about the apparent whiteness of the smaller field of the digital humanities (DH). In 2012 Tara McPherson was moved to ask, "Why are the digital humanities so white?" in an attempt to explain the phenomenon through "lenticular logic," a "covert racial logic" of the mid-twentieth-century post-civil rights era that forces us to view the

whole in terms of fragments or nodes that removes history, “relation and context” (2012, 144). In professions and fields that are overwhelmingly white, how might an intersectional approach help us to untangle the embodied, the legal, and the historical politics of digital humanities and librarianship work?

Brittney Cooper describes intersectionality as “an analytic frame capable of attending to the particular positionality of black women and other women of color both in civil rights law and within civil rights movements” (2015, 385). Cooper traces the genealogy of intersectionality as far back as the nineteenth century, to the writings of Black women like Anna Julia Cooper, who wrote of being victim to both the “woman question” and the “race problem,” while likely “confronting crushing poverty too” (387). When Kimberlé Crenshaw theorized intersectionality, it was a deliberate move to, as Cooper describes, “[allow] for recognition of the black female subject within *juridical* structures of power, where she had heretofore remained invisible and illegible, and thus unable to obtain any kind of justice” (390; emphasis added). Most important, as Brittney Cooper points out, is the emphasis on “structural identities,” or the ways in which laws and institutions determine peoples’ identities, which are different from personal identities, a form of representation that has primarily been used in feminist theories as “traveling theories” (Cooper 2015, 387; Bilge 2013). For example, Anne identifies as a cisgender Vietnamese American feminist, the primary income earner in her family, a mother to rescue dogs and cats, an academic, a librarian, a digital humanist, and lover of genre fiction. The law determines her identity outside of these self-identifications, from categories assigned along juridical lines. According to the law, she is a naturalized citizen, a refugee arriving before 1995, a married woman who pays joint taxes in a certain tax bracket, and so on. If Anne were to have been caught forging checks in her youth, she could be detained and deported (Do 2018; Dunst 2018; Wiltz 2016). It doesn’t matter how Anne identifies, unless it aligns with categories that matter to the state: nationality, legal status, tax bracket, criminal history.

This past year, these legal categories loomed as specters over our professional and personal lives, when Kush’s visa status became indeterminate. Kush’s yearlong appointment was accompanied by arduous, behind-the-scenes advocacy work, requiring them and those they valued as community to produce endless documentation to prove how their doctoral degree in architecture and related work in the digital and public humanities had prepared them for a career in digital pedagogy librarianship practice. Both of us were hired as digital pedagogy librarians because of our experiences practicing digital pedagogy in our own classes and supporting it in those of others. We met the

qualifications outlined in the job: MLIS *or equivalent*. Neither had an MLIS degree, and that detail proved to be a complicating factor. Kush's lack of an MLIS, in addition to their foreign-born status, made them ineligible to continue in this role as per the books of our institution's international center. The experience of trying to meet shifting, incomprehensible bureaucratic expectations to prove educational and professional equivalency was alienating and exhausting to say the least, making all the more real the question of institutional erasures that many international candidates like Kush remain subjected to during and beyond their student and postdoctoral lives.

Throughout their appointment, Kush advanced a praxis of survival whilst trying to make sense of the recurring contingencies of a hybrid digital humanities career invested in public scholarship. They grappled with ways in which to collaboratively build digital pedagogy infrastructures to include those who are surviving institutional erasures. Following the words of queer scholar Keguro Macharia on the teachings of Audre Lorde (2017), Kush also found themselves thinking about individuals who did not survive the injustices of historically white, upper-caste, patriarchal spaces, and still others whose labors might never survive these interconnected forces. For Kush—as a queer feminist scholar, writer, and teacher—their partnership with Anne was not merely academic or geographical but *against their hybridity*, and often deeply personal. With transitions in professional titles and therefore legal categories, the legibility of Kush's right to stay in the US was made precarious. Ultimately, Kush had to transition out of their academic role and move to India, their country of origin. It did not matter that Kush was a brilliant scholar, a hard-working employee, a top US university-trained academic, and a valuable librarian. Their doctoral credentials did not perfectly map onto the job category, and the institutions and structures that had the power to determine whether they were able to remain refused to act on their behalf. The result was heartbreaking.

In recounting these personal stories, we are not trying to elicit sympathy. Instead, we draw connections between the personal, the political, and the theoretical and ground them in the real and material, a prominent concern of CRT. We apply this lens to our work as academics and librarians whose identities are rooted in the Global South and the Third World, who write this chapter across time zones and borders, despite rolling blackouts and monsoons, and differential care duties. We are practicing what Third World feminist Chandra Mohanty describes as

“feminism without borders” ... to stress that our most expansive and inclusive visions of feminism need to be attentive to borders while learning to transcend them.... It acknowledges the fault lines, conflicts, differences, fears, and containment that borders represent.

It acknowledges that there is no one sense of a border, that the lines between and through nations, races, classes, secularities, religions, and disabilities are real—and that a feminism without borders must envision change and social justice work across these lines of demarcation and division. (2003, 2)

In our particular cases, our bodies literally marked diversity at our majority-white institution. That legible diversity and difference in itself was not enough to be held as valuable. Nor is diversity enough. We want to move beyond definitions of diversity as “benign variation” that “bypasses power as well as history to suggest a harmonious empty pluralism,” and recognize the extensive labor that is involved in “doing diversity” (Mohanty 2003, 193). Extending Mohanty’s analysis with a more thorough ethnographic study of diversity workers, Sarah Ahmed writes that the “responsibility for diversity and equality is unevenly distributed. It is also the case that the distribution of this work is political: if diversity and equality work is less valued by organizations, then to become responsible for this work can mean to inhabit institutional spaces that are less valued” (2012, 4). This is especially the case for People of Color, as “you *already* embody diversity by providing an institution of whiteness with color” (4; emphasis in original). We want to acknowledge that in addition to providing color, we also provide additional benefits in terms of expertise, critical perspective, and disciplinary training, and that these benefits also come with discomfort, as they make visible our politics and commitments to change making along deliberate structural lines.

### LIBRARIES, DIGITAL HUMANITIES, AND IDEOLOGIES OF “NICENESS”

It is important to draw out the connections linking librarianship and digital humanities, which on the surface may seem incomparable outside the fact that digital humanities is present in various forms within academic libraries. One of the most striking parallels in librarianship and digital humanities is the prevalence of scholarship and subcommunities that have been important in critiquing the neutrality of the two fields, not unlike the emergence of CRT to incorporate the critical examination of race and power within legal studies. This trend amounts to rigorous systemic and structural critique that attempts to diagnose problems of whiteness and the rhetorics and ideologies of benignancy, niceness, collegiality, and neutrality. In librarianship, groups like #CritLib and #LibrariesWeHere in LIS, and in digital humanities, movements like #transformDH, #dhPoCo, #FemDh, #RaceDH, #QueerDH, #AnticolonialDH, and #OurDHIs, have been doing critical work to draw attention to inequities in practice and to structural and systemic racism, which informs the development of

the fields, but they also have provided powerful arenas for community building and collectivity for marginal groups.

Unlike digital humanities—which is identified as a “big tent,” an academic field, or a community of practice, depending on who you ask—librarianship is often attributed an ethos and a set of professional values as a vocation.<sup>3</sup> As Fobazi Ettarh writes, “Many librarians refer to the field of librarianship as a calling” (2018). This notion of a calling leads to her larger critique, wherein she names “vocational awe” as something that determines the general lack of critical reflection among librarians about librarianship. Ettarh defines “vocational awe” more clearly as “the set of ideas, values, and assumptions librarians have about themselves and the profession that result in beliefs that libraries as institutions are inherently good and sacred, and therefore beyond critique.” These understandings of librarianship have had material consequences in the makeup of the profession, which is overwhelmingly white and female, a reification of the “Lady Bountiful,” a Victorian archetype that represented white women as virtuous and philanthropic, performing “civilizing” work within a colonial context (Schlesselman-Tarango 2016).

Digital humanities, by comparison, is much younger as a field and would not be considered a profession with its own set of professional values or ethics, though there has been a preoccupation among some to identify such values. With “‘This Is Why We Fight’: Defining the Values of the Digital Humanities” (2013), Lisa Spiro became an early proponent of developing a core set of values for digital humanities in light of extensive debates occurring in the early 2000s, when humanities computing of the 1980s was evolving into the field we would come to know as digital humanities. Scholars, funding agencies, administrators, and others were struggling to define what “counted” as digital humanities and who had the right to call themselves a digital humanist.<sup>4</sup> Spiro intervened to argue that there were more important things to establish first and foremost: “Rather than debating who is in and who is out, the DH community needs to develop a keener sense of what it stands for and what is at stake in its work” (2013, 17). These statements suggest that regardless of its decades-long history, the digital humanities did not have a core set of values by which its scholars identified themselves or operated. In describing the process and significance of establishing a values statement, Spiro goes on to recommend example values documents, including the American Library Association’s “Core Values of Librarianship.” Spiro writes that “this list of eleven values emphasizes the civic role that libraries play in promoting access, confidentiality/privacy, democracy, diversity, education and lifelong learning, intellectual freedom, preservation, the public good,



professionalism, service, and social responsibility” (21). She goes on to discuss the potential importance of a core set of values for digital humanities, as a field that bridges academic organizations and libraries: “Bridging these two communities, the digital humanities community brings together core scholarly values such as critical dialogue and free inquiry with an ethic focused on the democratic sharing of ideas” (21). It is notable that it is a white woman and LIS professional who is advocating for this, even though digital humanities itself has historically been white and male.<sup>5</sup>

The debate about the soul of DH took on a very different tenor and a much more public form in the *Los Angeles Review of Books* (*LARB*), where Daniel Allington, Sarah Brouillette, and David Golumbia warned us about the stakes of not establishing our values, arguing that the digital humanities had become complicit in the neoliberal “takeover” of the university (2016). Responses were swift and withering. One commenter described the article as “a shockingly one-sided, narrow, and insulting analysis,” another stated it was “needlessly oversimplified polemicizing,” while yet another described the tone of the article as one of “a deep and slightly paranoid sense of insecurity.” For a field known for its niceness, criticism was not a pill easily swallowed.

In recent years, however, we have seen work in the digital humanities that has greatly diversified and become more inclusive. In addition to the plethora of projects and initiatives around Anglo, early American, and European authors and contexts, we now see projects like the Colored Conventions Project (CCP), which built a feminist collective and distributed community around a digital archive of the nineteenth-century Colored Conventions and the celebration of Douglass Day through transcribe-a-thons, and the Torn Apart/Separados project, which describes itself as “a rapidly deployed critical data & visualization intervention in the USA’s 2018 ‘Zero Tolerance Policy’ for asylum seekers at the US Ports of Entry and the humanitarian crisis that has followed” (Mobilized Humanities Collaboration 2018). These advances, however, are *in spite of*, not *because of* the evolution in digital humanities as a field. Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 would seemingly prevent discrimination in academic settings on “the basis of race, color, and national origin,” based on the principle of equality, but the reality is a field rife with disparity in terms of funding, opportunities, and resources, all symptoms of institutional and structural racism. This is a reminder that there are material consequences that are evidently political, regardless of any discourse on niceness or neutrality. It is exceptional when projects receive the level of funding and support that CCP did, and it almost always involves the already overburdened faculty, students, and staff taking great risks in launching projects that later go on to receive public acclaim, as was the

case with Torn Apart/Separados. Such work is not new to BIPOC folx in the academy, who are taking risks large and small, every day, to do our jobs, to improve our institutions, and to do good by our communities.

### **“WORKING IDENTITY” AND PRECARIOUS LABOR**

Of the many incendiary claims made in the *LARB* piece by Allington, Brouillette, and Columbia, one that really struck a chord with critics, was the argument that digital humanities promoted “the rebranding of insecure campus employment as an empowering ‘alt-ac’ career choice, and the redefinition of technical expertise as a form (indeed, the superior form) of humanist knowledge” (2016). One vocal critic responded in the comments by writing, “The implication that all academics who refer to themselves as ‘alt ac’ are there because they could not do ‘better’ (presumably, as TT academics) is insulting to everyone involved.” At this point, it may be helpful to backtrack a bit and ask: What exactly is meant by the term *alt-ac*? What parallels do we see elsewhere in the academy? Why is the term so contentious? And what does this have to do with librarians of color?

Bethany Nowviskie and Jason Rhody (NEH Office of Digital Humanities) are credited with coining the term *alt-ac* in a series of tweets in 2009, “to describe the scholarly work performed by many of us in and in the orbit of the academy who do not hold traditional faculty jobs but do perform scholarly labor” (Rogers 2013; Posner 2013). In a report for the Scholarly Communication Institute, Katina Rogers wrote:

The changing nature of career paths for humanities scholars is an issue of particular concern to digital humanities practitioners, who have long been working in hybrid roles that combine elements of traditional scholarship, like research and teaching, with other elements, such as software development, librarianship, high-level administrative responsibilities, and more. (2013, 3)

Though some find the term problematic, following the economic crisis of 2008, these non-tenure-track academic positions seemed a godsend for humanities PhDs for whom there were dwindling job prospects. As Miriam Posner stated at the American Studies Association in 2013, “For many grad students, alt-ac has been a revelation. It’s so important for Ph.D. students to know that you can, in fact, work as something other than a faculty member with your Ph.D. And you can love this work and feel that you’re using what you’re [*sic*] learned in your program, too.” What became troubling, as Posner and others have noted, is that alt-ac as an additional career trajectory was quickly lauded “as a solution to the academic jobs crisis” (Posner 2013). The rise of the

alt-ac, in an age of increasing contingency and economic retrenchment in the university, boded poorly for the future of humanities PhDs. As Posner noted in the same talk, in addition to the rewarding and challenging nature of the work, there are also many downsides to alt-ac jobs: these jobs tend to be insecure, have little to no representation in faculty governance, tend to be underpaid, are often short-term, and you don't own your work the way a faculty member might own her scholarly work.

These alt-ac, contingent, term appointments are also how we came to be in libraries. Anne, in 2014, accepted a position as a "digital scholar" at a small liberal arts college in Southern California. It was a position funded by a Mellon humanities grant, a collaboration between a faculty member and the library, which would provide funding to create a "digital liberal arts program" (essentially a digital humanities program at a liberal arts school). This grant would also provide bridge funding to transition the three-year appointment into a permanent position. She would become a full-time employee, neither librarian nor faculty, physically situated in the library and teaching courses among the faculty. At a small resource-poor institution, this position was designed to be the "lonely only" digital person on campus, the "miracle worker."<sup>6</sup> For Anne, she was the only Asian American in a library where all but one of the librarians were white. Faculty and staff were confused by her status: Was she a librarian? Was she faculty? Was she staff? Did she get a vote in faculty governance? What department did she teach in? Who evaluated her teaching? Which onboarding training did she attend as a new employee? These questions became increasingly difficult to wade through as the political climate changed on campus and as resources became more scarce. Her teaching load increased while her coordination, programming, and consultation work did not. And as the original three-year term came to a close, a change in administrators meant a change in institutional priorities and commitments. For those in the libraries, this kind of appointment will sound familiar, as it resembles temporary diversity residencies and newer library positions in emerging fields where institutions are unsure about making long-term commitments.

Toward the end of their doctoral education, Kush secured a yearlong postdoctoral fellowship at the humanities center of the same university where they completed their PhD. Building on an extensive set of experiences in arts and humanities program coordination, academic mentoring, public engagement, and undergraduate teaching, this role and its nontraditional focus on academic administration, research, and teaching were deeply transformative for Kush. The position enabled Kush to deepen cross-campus connections and meaningfully integrate them into thinking about the publics of engaged humanities work. This collaborative role allowed them to practice

new connections with academic librarians and members of the teaching and learning center around digital humanities pedagogy and research. In their postdoctoral work, Kush also served as the codirector of the university's graduate teacher certificate in digital media program, supporting the professional development of graduate students interested in developing critical pedagogy that engages in digital practice and inquiry. Amid the center's leadership shift, Kush's yearlong appointment got extended by another year, but the questions from human resources on how a PhD in architecture mapped onto an "alt-ac" public and digital humanities career remained. And these questions were not without consequence. Like Anne, Kush was the only person of color in an organization of otherwise all-white full-time staff. Additionally, as an international candidate, Kush's advocacy around work sponsorship in an increasingly anti-immigrant climate meant that the experience and labor of proving their intellectual worth in the face of recurring microaggressions were unique to them.

Such narratives are a common refrain for those of us who have been in and out of alt-ac positions. We've been in libraries, in digital humanities centers, in research clusters, in postdocs, in technologist and programmer positions, and fellowships. Similar contingent positions are also prevalent in libraries in the form of internships, residencies, fellowships, grant-funded positions, and other term appointments. Often, these librarians are floating between departments, asked to learn about the operations of new environments and to make substantive, structural change while essentially being outsiders whose appointments have end dates. In many cases, the conditions of precarity are made ever more uncertain by additional vectors of insecurity determined by one's race, gender identity, religious identity, economic status, immigration status, or family status. In our cases, we lacked what Harris calls "the property functions of whiteness," which Ladson-Billings describes as "rights of disposition, rights to use and enjoyment, reputation and status property, and the absolute right to exclude" (Harris 1993; Ladson Billings 1998, 59). Because we are not in possession of the "treasured property" of whiteness, we become the ones who are excluded and whose security and employment are always under threat, sometimes overtly. Of paramount importance for many of these positions like ours is the burden placed on the individuals hired as librarians or staff members of color (who may or may not also be burdened by student loans, care responsibilities, the threat of deportation, and so on) who are, by virtue of their very racially marked bodies, hired to be diversity workers and asked to address the prevailing whiteness and homogeneity of libraries and digital humanities.

Though we do not have demographic data on digital humanists, the ALA has published data on libraries, citing that 86.7 percent of librarians identify as white and

81 percent identify as female (Rosa and Henke 2017).<sup>7</sup> Numerous studies and presentations in recent years have noted the impact of such white work environments on librarians and staff of color. As legal scholars Carbado and Gulati describe it, we librarians of color spend a good deal of our personal resources on “working identity,” or negotiating and performing our identities to conform to or match the dominant expectations of our workplace culture (2013, 223). They go on to say that “performing identity consumes resources in the form of time and effort, which is one of the costs of discrimination” (229). As Brown and colleagues observed, “This demands learning about not only the organizational culture but also the white ‘professional’ culture, all in an attempt to ‘fit’ within our institution’s boundaries of whiteness” (2018, 169–170). Performing our identities, molding ourselves to “fit” into our workplace, overcoming “vocational awe”—these are all enormous tasks of affective labor that take a toll on our physical and emotional health and well-being (Drake 2017; Ettarh 2018). And this only applies to those benign, “neutral,” well-meaning workplaces, not those where fellow colleagues and supervisors are overtly hostile, unwelcoming, or abusive. Such daily experiences often lead to feelings of isolation and alienation, depression, burnout, and other more extreme symptoms of “low morale” among employees (Kendrick 2017; Brown et al. 2018).

As Sara Ahmed so poignantly reminds us, “If institutionalizing diversity is a goal for diversity workers, it does not necessarily mean it is the institution’s goal” (2012, 22). Likewise, “diversity work is hard because it can involve doing within institutions what would not otherwise be done *by them*” (25). If anything, institutions, libraries and digital humanities spaces included, are designed to resist efforts to diversify and become inclusive, and those who are tasked with making long-term structural changes must “fight their way” (26). Is there potential, however, to make this fight more manageable, and the work more sustaining for those who are charged with or moved to do it?

## RADICAL CARE, OR HOW TO DO BETTER

Perhaps it comes as no surprise that the changes we have seen in recent years in the digital humanities have not been spontaneous. Much of the progress has come after ample critique. In 2011, in response to the back-and-forth debates, the navel-gazing, and the boundary setting that was happening in digital humanities, the #transformDH collective, a group of queer and BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) graduate students and postdocs, came together at the American Studies Association and issued a series of critical questions for digital humanists. Anne

was among this collective, who identified itself somewhat facetiously as “an academic guerrilla movement seeking to (re)define capital-letter Digital Humanities as a force for transformative scholarship by collecting, sharing, and highlighting projects that push at its boundaries and work for social justice, accessibility, and inclusion” (#transformDH 2011; Bailey et al. 2016). Within a few weeks, we started to receive backlash. In one of the kinder critical blog responses, Roger Whitson wrote,

Do we really need guerrilla movements? Are war metaphors, or concepts of overturning and redefining, truly the right kind of metaphors to use when talking about change in the digital humanities? It seems to me that the word “guerilla” reappropriates the collaborative good will of the digital humanities.... The digital humanities doesn’t need to be changed. I can already see it changing the atmosphere of the MLA, making it easier for people to connect with each other, enjoy their time together, and conceptualize new and exciting work. (qtd. in Cecire 2012)

Whitson’s use of the phrase “collaborative good will” to describe the beneficence of the field aligns with what some had termed its “niceness”—a pervasive and recurring issue in numerous fields and disciplines.

As #transformDH and others would point out, some found the DH brand of welcome more inviting than others, and this had much to do with one’s embodied identity, one’s marked or unmarked body. Natalia Cecire, in response to Whitson, critiqued this notion, writing,

The valuation of the guerilla, the oppositional, the maroon, and the fugitive that characterizes #transformDH is, as I see it, clearly indebted to the legacies of queer theory and critical race studies.... This is not a language that comports very well with the dominant rhetorics of digital humanities, which emphasize openness, collaboration, and inclusiveness—which are, in short, liberal. (2012)

Again and again, the language of openness, of collaboration, of inclusiveness is reiterated in relation to the identity of digital humanities. As junior scholars of color on the receiving end of criticism from (often) senior scholars in the field, it did not feel welcome and inclusive to us. Indeed, Alexis Lothian would write, “People feel fannish about digital humanities and that digital humanities’ networks operate like a fandom” (2018). For all its talk-friendly inclusivity, the debates that unfolded in this period were “shaped like fannish conflicts” (Lothian 2011).

In 2018, another group project and public performance called #OurDHIs at a summer digital humanities institute brought to life the continuities and collaborations within and beyond the #transformDH movement. #OurDHIs served as a call-for-action hashtag to extend the political origins of the previously successful #MyDHIs

organizing into a community praxis around what DH pedagogy is and can be. Kush was part of this organizing effort, or “interruption,” as it was referred to by a few nonparticipating members during the weeklong event. Collaboration was key to this class project, but so was critique—critique of the erasures and silencing of discourses on race, Indigenous studies, and social justice, and postcolonial, queer, and feminist scholarship in the practices of the capital-letter Digital Humanities. The participants’ goal was not to reduce #OurDhIs to a singular moment, but rather to position it as a supportive, critical, and living framework that interconnects the layered histories, sites, and minoritized communities of digital humanities scholarship and pedagogy.

From our individual and collective work, we want to turn to the work of adrienne maree brown, who asks us to “begin to understand what is possible when a collective of humans is not afraid to feel life together” (2019, 273). Already, we see groups like We Here in LIS cohere would-be marginalized individuals into radical loving, caring communities that help underrepresented researchers, librarians, teachers, and activists to sustain each other through community building. For us, our ongoing work with our respective collectives—for Anne that includes #transformDH and the Situated Critical Race+Media (SCRAM) collective, and for Kush that means #OurDhIs and the Pedagogy of the Digitally Oppressed #AnticolonialDH—have been instrumental to our own academic activist work.

Most crucially, these collectives have provided space not only where we can come together as allies in struggle, but also where we can model and enact care to help the marginal survive academic or hostile spaces. In some spheres, this type of activity has been termed building “counterspaces” for peer mentorship. In the case of Pedagogy of the Digitally Oppressed, for instance, we call ourselves colearners and activists. In other spaces, as in the case of SCRAM, we call ourselves “kin” (SCRAM 2019). These counterspaces are made functional through programming, regular meetings, cowriting, professional mentorship, and informal relationships. We must recognize, however, that this kind of community building requires a substantial investment of added invisible labor that is seldom recognized or rewarded by our institutions. For some of us, though, this is pleasurable, life-sustaining labor. This is how we care for each other and ourselves. It is the kind of labor that keeps us in our jobs and as part of our professions. We are always reminded that the neoliberal academy will prioritize efficiency-centered interventions over lived and structurally transformative relationships. In spite of that, we nurture our relationships, even when they may slow down the system. It is relationships that will always serve as the organization’s nurturing core.

## CONCLUSION

Ultimately, we hope this chapter illuminates the complexities experienced by folk working at the intersection of libraries and digital humanities who are also inhabiting racialized or “Othered” identities. For these individuals, there is a pressure to “build” and “make” (programs, projects, relationships, among others), often while simultaneously being expected to bring an uncritical “diversity” to these programs. This practice results in erasing difference and excluding the valuable perspectives, experiences, and contributions such varied situated knowledge would bring to these contexts. This experience does not need to be the norm, however, and we have the opportunity to do better, to build the feminist, antiracist, and anticolonial digital humanities library spaces of our dreams. It is about more than simply bringing in people with different backgrounds or embodying different identity markers in white spaces. It’s about recognizing the White Supremacist histories embedded within the institutions and systems where we work and live, and learning ways to resist and to build generative, nurturing relationships from within. It’s about making each other feel *cared for*, *seen*, and *heard*. Those of us who have the power to shape our organizations must intentionally work toward making our workplaces spaces of love and growth, rather than oppression and extraction. As adrienne maree brown asks us to consider, “What would happen if we aligned with a pleasure politic, especially as people who are surviving long-term oppressive conditions?” (2019, 5). We live and work in oppressive structures that do not value us, yet want to take from us. We do not have to let this happen, though. We can take small steps toward change to help ourselves and others feel loved and cared for. We can also endeavor to change those structures, break them down, make them better.

## NOTES

1. In general, we personally identify as “Brown” in the way that Carbado and Gulati (2000) describe as “sense of self” identity. Likewise, our workplaces and external institutions have also attributed racialized identities (“attributed” identity) to us because of our racialized names, our marked bodies, and our immigration statuses.
2. Intersectionality is a critical framework developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw in the late 1980s and early 1990s to explore the overlapping dimensions of Black women’s identities that determine their experiences.
3. Though the “big tent” circus metaphor has been used by numerous people, here we cite Alan Liu, who both defines and historicizes the term and then calls for us to move away from it: “The ‘big tent’ metaphor, of course, comes down to us from old-timey showcases of mass experience



such as nineteenth-century tent revivals and big-top circuses....Circuses, for example, were spectacles of variety.... We need new paradigms and *dispositifs* or, in computer-speak, *platforms* for diversity that move the modern democratic paradox of open and closed (inclusive and exclusive) beyond nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century paradigms of mass ‘variety’” (2018). Laura Braunstein defines digital humanities as a “community of practice,” meaning “lot of people doing a lot of different things” (Kim 2016).

4. There are numerous blogs, articles, and chapters that attempt to do this, including a series of articles published in the *Digital Humanities Quarterly*, numerous panels at the Modern Language Association annual meetings, and chapters such as Matthew Kirschenbaum’s “What Is Digital Humanities and What’s It Doing in English Departments?” where he points interested readers toward the Wikipedia article on the topic.

5. This has been changing in recent years, and it is made ever more visible with the efforts of groups like #transformDH and #BlackDH, but examples abound. Tara McPherson notes the whiteness of DH in “Why Are the Digital Humanities So White?” Bethany Nowviskie discussed this dynamic in her blog post “What Do Girls Dig?” (2012), which notes that the NEH-funded Digging into Data Challenge Conference included only two female speakers out of thirty-three, and in a follow-up tweet acknowledging, “I’m so used to being the only woman in the room.” In 2015, in a talk at the International Digital Humanities Conference, Deb Verhoeven called out the “parade of patriarchs” and told the “blokes” in the auditorium, “You have made a world designed around ensuring your own personal comfort, but it’s not comfortable for many, many other people.... This is not about issuing another policy advisory for ‘inclusion.’ This is not about developing a new checklist to mitigate your biases. And it’s definitely not about inviting a token female speaker to join you—this actually needs to be about your plans to exit the stage” (2015). Often, the most striking example is the list of course offerings and instructors for the Digital Humanities Summer Institute (where we have both taught), where in any given year, more of the instructors are white men named John or Chris than women *or* People of Color. Notably, in the cases of McPherson and Nowviskie, at the time, one considered race and the other considered gender, but not both together.

6. As Paige Morgan describes it, in 2017 the Digital Libraries Federation announced a working group for “miracle workers,” or “digital humanities and digital scholarship librarians who are often tasked with accomplishing monumental goals with minimal support” (Morgan 2017). Though it was meant to be playful, many took issue with the term, arguing that it obscures the deep expertise of these professionals and the very real challenges they face in their institutions.

7. With regard to demographic data on digital humanists, again, arguments about “who counts” as a digital humanist makes this kind of work impossible.

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