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Futures of Digital Scholarly Editing. Edited by Matt Cohen, Kenneth M. Price, and Caterina Bernardini

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Futures of Digital Scholarly Editing, edited by Matt Cohen, Kenneth M. Price, and Caterina Bernardini, is a collection of essays by leading thinkers in the field on the creation, interrogation, and publication of digital scholarly editions. This volume is for anyone interested in scholarly editing, in both digital and print media. The collection emerges from a symposium—"The Walt Whitman Archive and the Futures of Digital Scholarly Editing"—held at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln in 2021.

The editors organize the essays into two parts. The first part, "Transformations of Textual Scholarship," focuses on the production of digital scholarly editions and the evolving technological and editorial paradigms in which they are created. In the second part, "The Convergence of Digital Archiving and Scholarly Editing," the focus turns to the incorporation of such editions into digital archives and consideration of their ethical and political contexts. Notwithstanding this division, contributions throughout the volume reflect on the technological, ethical, and archival concerns explored in this review.

The volume surveys a diverse scholarly landscape, and the editors note that each contribution reframes a particular topic of digital scholarly editing. They write:

Each chapter enacts a reconsideration of digital scholarly editing, calling for a reconfiguration of its intellectual nature, realm, and stakes. To put it in a Gramscian way, all the chapters in this collection

inquire about how to work and what to do for the creation and preservation of organic intellectual ecosystems, rather than traditional and hegemonic hierarchical structures and infrastructures, for digital projects to develop and to persist. All chapters, then, crucially ask readers to shift their thinking. (xvi)

The production of digital scholarly editions has increased at a rapid pace. Indeed, the editors claim that “[i]t’s a golden age of edition-making” (ix). While this is true by most metrics, the editors fail to acknowledge the current decline in the appreciation and funding of digital scholarly editing. Most of the book’s chapters are generally positive, celebrating new dynamics, the possibilities of “generous” editions, collaboration, and the potential of democratizing and reparative processes. However, the authors who focus on technological issues—Elena Pierazzo, Julia Flanders, and Fotis Jannidis—are more cautious and warn of the risks of intellectual surrender, the abdication of responsibility, and difficulties in collaboration across disciplines.

Accompanying the proliferation of digital scholarly editions has been a fundamental shift in the public role and ethical responsibilities of the creators of such projects. Several contributors (Flanders, Marta L. Werner, Dirk Van Hulle, and Stephanie P. Browner) argue for decentering the privileging of an Ur-text conception of authoritative editions and hierarchical structures and infrastructures. They advocate instead for editions that reflect textual fluidity, enable broader remits of cultural heritage, and normalize foregrounding “the ever-changing agencies, relationships, and nonneutral practices (in lieu of static categories) that make and mediate texts” (xvi). Viewing edited texts as innately fluid highlights the complex, contingent, relational, and social nature of texts and their paratexts and contexts.

The editors highlight the rapid and ongoing changes in AI and other technologies; user expectations; sustainability concerns; and social, political, and ethical issues. They write:

The present digital environment is changing, and so are the times, raising questions that call for a rethinking of both the design and the public role of the scholarly editorial project in electronic form. New technologies, platforms, and user expectations are emerging rapidly... When we consider the technical and aesthetic challenges of designing editions for the age of portable or ubiquitous computing ... we can’t help but recognize a sea change in the world to which digital scholarly editing must address itself.

The landscape of editing is feeling the impact of linked open data (LOD), the development of application programming interface (API), the widespread adoption of GitHub, and other pathways for exposing, accessing, and repurposing data. (ix–x)

How should editors respond to, incorporate, or avoid such new technologies? How can they evaluate their true costs? The number of technological and methodological developments that have gone mainstream since the symposium in 2021 is dizzying. While there are certainly considerations of such methodologies (especially in the first chapter), it is surprising that in a collection of essays on the futures of digital scholarly editing, there is not more consideration of the multifaceted developments in these areas, especially given the widespread adoption of generative AI. While the editors note the use of new technologies to expose, access, and repurpose data, the misuse of such technologies and its ramifications are not discussed.

Given my own decades of work supporting, interrogating, and producing outputs related to the Guidelines of the Text Encoding Initiative (TEI), any mention of this crucial standard (or similar textual markup formats) stood out while reading.¹ Many chapters noted the centrality of this community-developed, flexible, and open international standard for the creation of digital scholarly editions.

In her chapter on the Charles W. Chesnutt Archive, Browner documents how the archive has benefited from using TEI and how its flexibility has enabled the archivists to customize it to document extensions for categorizing proofreading marks, one of the original forms of markup.² Browner argues that we need scholarly editions that are “‘generous,’ undergirded by an ethos that has emerged from the groundswell of work in Black bibliography, an ethos that foregrounds relationality, contexts, communities, and forebears, and [is] rich in robust collations, annotations, and genetic histories” (51). Browner uses the work of the Chesnutt Archive to show that generous editions should be no less scholarly or complete but embedded in the community of scholars in an open and generative manner. She argues persuasively that the future of digital scholarly editing will be enriched by the archives of Black writers such as Chesnutt.

In a chapter on the challenges of computational methods to the theory and practice of textual scholarship, Pierazzo observes that adding markup to texts “represents the methodological core of digital editing” (4) and its standardization has facilitated the growth in computational methods in scholarly editing. According to Pierazzo, it would be beneficial to store many of the outputs of computational literary studies, such as stylometric analyses, in TEI. She also discusses markup standards like VisColl for modeling document collation and the EarlyPrint project, which seeks to enrich the markup of books from the Text Creation Partnership (themselves already in TEI XML). Similarly, Flanders (quoting Siemens et al.)³ agrees that well-documented encoding “facilitate[s] an ongoing scholarly conversation about the text” (18) that enables collaborative editing, as others can build upon or contest the edited text.

Other technologies have the potential to expand access to texts in other ways. One such technology is Handwritten Text Recognition (HTR), which promises to unleash an avalanche of previously difficult-to-access texts. These technologies are enabling editors to engage with much more massive collections and complete traditions of texts.⁴ Pierazzo asserts that the promise of distant editing (which is reminiscent of the promises of quantitative codicology) is finally becoming possible through these emergent technologies. Pierazzo also interrogates the potential anxieties of intellectual surrender when editors are forced to cede control through collaboration with computer scientists, or perhaps more likely, with the black-box algorithms of large language models.

Similarly, in a chapter on computational literary studies, Jannidis interrogates the parallels and convergences of computational literary studies (CLS) and scholarly editing. He laments that in many cases those from computational literary studies do not leverage the sophisticated encoding of digital editions because “the texts are not made available in the TEI encoding to readers” (77). Jannidis highlights a project—the Faust digital scholarly genetic editions—which does release all their TEI-encoded texts via GitHub, potentially allowing them to be built upon by others.

Another project capitalizing on the use of TEI is the Walt Whitman Archive. Writing about the archive, Gray considers its migration and preservation, noting that the underlying TEI XML files have aided the sustainable evolution of the archive and that users often “download the project’s XML to use for various forms of computational analysis” (200), echoing Jannidis’s earlier observations. John Unsworth’s “Afterword” sums up the

use of TEI for digital scholarly editions by recording that it is, indeed, “the world’s largest and longest-lasting ontological undertaking, which Flanders described as a metastandard for organizing arguments about texts... . TEI represents collaboration on a large scale” (246).

One of the volume’s greatest contributions is its attention to the ethical dimensions of textual scholarship, digital scholarly editing, and digital archiving. Contributors K. J. Rawson, Nicole Gray, and Werner highlight the potential harm of openness in some archives, the problems and differences between preservation and sustainability, and the challenges of authority in designing projects, some of whose existence depends on structures that contribute to rising global temperatures.

In “Beyond Social Editing: Peer-to-Peer Systems for Digital Editions,” Flanders argues that “the ‘ethics of care’ or ‘radical empathy’ that [Michelle] Caswell and Marika Cifor propose as the foundations for an archival practice rooted in and oriented toward social justice are established as the primary virtues of significance” (24). In reinforcing that a social edition’s foundational goal should be empowerment and the creation of social connections, Flanders asks us “to de-objectify the author and their work,” offering the example of the Colored Conventions Project as a truly community and social edition benefiting from scholarly reciprocity.

The Colored Conventions Project is explored in more detail by Patterson in an essay describing the Colored Convention Movement (1830–1900) as an example of one of the longest protest systems by Black people in America. Patterson examines the project’s radical democratization of access to the movement’s crowd-sourced transcribed minutes and more. Its re-presentation of the realist typographic capture of many voices, including the historical Black audience, gives us an impressive lens through which to view other approaches to archival digitization. Describing the 1879 National Conference of Colored Men at Nashville, Patterson writes that the conference’s minutes have “typographical signifiers like ‘[Laughter.]’ and ‘[Applause.]’” (129) (bracketed material in original), which many would argue are themselves a form of descriptive markup.

Chapters by Folsom and K. J. Rawson examine the histories of two other projects, with Folsom returning to a discussion of the Walt Whitman Archive (WWA) and Rawson introducing the Digital Transgender Archive (DTA). Folsom’s essay on the WWA gives us an overview of the laudable, if occasionally reverie-filled, development and evolution of the archive and building “a vast sea of diverse grasses,” a metaphorical exploration of digital archiving over a quarter of a century. Folsom’s history of the WWA is not one of a single driving motivation but of collaborative work, extensively developed and improved by many people.

Like the WWA, the DTA exists and continues to be possible because of the work of many people. However, the DTA raises a unique set of ethical issues. Although many of us tend to default to openness and transparency, Rawson reminds us of the human side of archives in foregrounding the ethics of care, especially relating to trans and gender-nonconforming people, when such approaches can sometimes create harm. Rawson reminds us that since “ideological neutrality is not possible or desirable in digital archives contexts, it is the responsibility of digital archivists to carefully attend to ethical representation and access—specifically for the people who are most impacted by our work—even when doing so may seem insurmountably challenging” (103). This responsibility is especially important when the power imbalance of the past distorts the documentary record of the materials in an archive. The DTA uses six questions to consider how to represent people ethically in the archive: should the person be included, how will this impact the person or their memory, will private information be shared, what rights do the subjects have, do they have an opportunity to represent themselves, and what subject terms are

appropriate. While not exhaustive, these questions keep the subjects and their ethical representation in focus, guided by using people-centered ethical frameworks lest the archive inadvertently prop up discriminatory systems.

The chapter by Robert Warrior, titled “Indigenous Publishing, Scholarly Editing, and the Digital Future,” also attends to this approach by investigating the history of Indigenous publication through an examination of N. Scott Momaday’s edition of Frederick Goddard Tuckerman’s complete poems. Warrior also surveys the work of another poet, Kenneth Jacob Jump, highlighting how Jump’s work fits into Warrior’s concept of intellectual sovereignty that is key in the history presented and to the potential for imagining the next Momaday “open-ended digital edition of self-published Indigenous authors” (191).

As one would expect in a volume on digital scholarly editing, there are discussions of different methods of reading and editing texts. As already mentioned, there is Pierazzo’s discussion of distant editing, which represents an epistemological break from more traditional philological forms of editing. It is, however, the chapter titled “Not Reading the Edition,” by Cassidy Holahan, Aylin Malcolm, and Whitney Trettien, which may appear more provocative. Here the authors are describing analytical bibliography—the scholarly consideration of the copy-specific material artifact of the book—to derive new information about how and why it was created. After reminding us of various philosophies of text and digital developments in the methodology of “not reading,” the chapter’s authors note:

Given the imbrication of digital technologies and book history, it is perhaps no surprise that the thinkers who helped unchain bibliography from literary studies are also some of the founding and most influential figures in digital humanities (DH), specifically digital editing and curation. (148)

The chapter continues with an introduction to the Manicule platform. This software presents the “phenomenal book” in a way that foregrounds the object’s own navigational mechanisms, physical structures, and internal principles of organization over conventional approaches like purely reading and searching the text. The authors provide a couple of case studies—on the works of Samuel Richardson and an astronomical anthology—to exemplify the use of Manicule as a platform.

Even with the advent of Manicule and other publishing platforms, old models persist. Dirk Van Hulle’s contribution examines the notion of a “complete-works edition” (CWE), pointing out that even in the digital age these are still modeled as print editions but are an oeuvre-in-motion. Van Hulle rightly suggests that the digital paradigm differs because “1) It challenges the single-text logic ... ; 2) it provides an inclusive approach to the author’s canon ... ; 3) it withstands the tendency to compartmentalise ... ; and 4) it offers an alternative form of reading” (34). None of this should come as much of a surprise to anyone already interested in digital scholarly editing, but in fleshing these out Van Hulle leads us naturally to a consideration of deep hermeneutics with a greater combining of digital scholarly editing and genetic criticism, and how this is necessary for a CWE to be, well, truly complete.

The final two chapters—“Preserving the Walt Whitman Archive” by Nicole Gray and “Unsilent Springs: Dearchivizing the Data Choirs of Dickinson’s Time-Shifted Birds” by Marta L. Werner—while seemingly quite different, both consider the importance of sustainability and taking the long view of digital archives. Gray discusses the preservation of materials that make up the WWA and transformations of the archive in the face of the ongoing sustainability crisis that faces many digital projects. Intermixed with considerations of graceful degradation and

sunsetting of projects, Gray concludes that a digital edition, and presumably also a digital archive, “is an investment not just in building and rebuilding but in keeping as care, in repair as return, in celebration and cooperation, in the willingness to work in moments” (211). Meanwhile, Werner’s musings on the possibility of a digital Dickinson’s birds,⁵ and the proposed radical conditionality of the very existence of any outputs, aspects of which degrade in response to the climate crisis, is a stark reminder of the fragility of the infrastructure and the precarity of our digital outputs in the Anthropocene.

The futures of digital scholarly editing are potentially moving, as Unsworth summarizes in his afterword, from representation to abstraction and from considering individual artifacts to studying collections in aggregate. Unsworth builds on Jannidis’s views on cooperation, observing that it is “the intergenerational transfer of intellectual, institutional, and reputational capital” (247) that ensures the continued development of digital scholarly editing. It is worth reiterating one of Unsworth’s concluding points, which he borrows from Deanna Marcum: “preservation begins at creation.” As we embark on the creation of digital scholarly editions and archives, this is a reminder to us all that preserving the histories of these projects—as well as their outputs—is paramount for future research.

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1. At the time of writing, I have been elected chair of the board of directors of the Consortium of the Text Encoding Initiative. ↵
 2. This is, indeed, precisely how project customizations of the TEI Guidelines are meant to work, though the project could proactively submit these changes to the TEI Technical Council if it was desirable to include them in the more general TEI Guidelines. ↵
 3. Ray Siemens, Constance Crompton, Daniel Powell, Alyssa Arbuckle, and Maggie Shirley, “Building a Social Edition of the Devonshire Manuscript,” in *Digital Scholarly Editing: Theories and Practices*, edited by Matthew James Driscoll and Elena Pierazzo (Open Book Publishers, 2016). ↵
 4. The only other substantive mentions of HTR are by Holahan, Malcolm, and Trettien, who are concerned that tools like HTR2CritEd will remove the need for scholarly editors entirely. Similar concerns may be had about developments such as Transkribus Sites, which publish the output from that software’s HTR but have not necessarily had the rigorous scholarly attention that most digital scholarly editions require. ↵
 5. See the digital project *Dickinson’s Birds* (<https://dickinsonsbirds.org/project>), curated by Werner et al. ↵