

## Review of *On the Digital Humanities: Essays and Provocations*, by Stephen Ramsay

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### Abstract

A review of *On the Digital Humanities: Essays and Provocations* by Stephen Ramsay.

### Keywords

digital humanities, theory, humanities, education

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Stephen Ramsay. *On the Digital Humanities: Essays and Provocations*. University of Minnesota Press, 2023. 186 pp. ISBN: 9781517915018.

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The digital humanities (DH) discipline functions as a discursive waypoint between traditional humanities research and computational research methods and queries. As a prominent theorist within the DH sphere, Stephen Ramsay knows that more than most; his latest book, *On the Digital Humanities: Essays and Provocations*, addresses the potential and problems facing the discipline in a collection of his essays, many of which began as talks delivered at conferences and colloquia over a fifteen-year period. The sixteen essays reflect Ramsay's hopes and fears for the discipline he remains deeply involved with. While it touches on various topics including data mining, pedagogy, and the creation of university centers for DH research, the recurring theme of the essays is the position of DH as a space where qualitative and quantitative research methodologies can join forces to create something new. Ramsay sums up his thoughts on these essays as a plea to current and future DH practitioners: "that digital humanities not forsake its connection to the humanities" (xi).

Ramsay's essays reflect his career as a DH scholar, teacher, and theorist across multiple institutions. Essay topics vary widely, from the Kinsey Report and its original analysis, to what it means to practice digital humanities not just on an individual level but as a discipline, to his differences of opinion with Stanley Fish on the place of the digital humanities within traditional humanistic inquiries. As is appropriate for a series of topics gleaned from speaking to large groups of librarians, administrators, humanities scholars and DH colleagues, the book stays focused on the bigger picture of the discipline within the academy and the larger academic community, rather than drilling down to specific projects, programs or movements within the DH discipline. Each essay stands alone and could easily be used for readings with either graduate or undergraduate students in a DH-focused course. Ramsay's experiences from the early days of the discipline serve as a useful reminder of the history of DH and how much change has occurred, even as we are still arguably in the youth of DH projects and research. The potential of the field's contributions to the humanities is clear to Ramsay, even as he argues that the discipline is also threatened by lack of clear direction and understanding from both within and without the DH community.

While most of the volume's essays are interesting to read and thought-provoking in terms of thinking about DH as a discipline and its directions, as well as offering more concrete advice to scholars thinking of jumping into DH or perhaps trying to organize a local community of digital humanists (whatever forms that might take), they combine to form a very top-down view. There are only minor mentions of ongoing efforts to highlight overlooked populations, expand the canon, make lost and overlooked material available, address accessibility of materials, and/or decenter traditional academic foci of research. For example, the essay "Digital Humanities and its Disconnects" comes closest to exploring the power of DH to engage in these conversations, but instead of looking at how these types of projects have built new avenues of inquiry, Ramsay focuses on the stakes of what happens if and when digital humanists, as a community, fail to question the structures of power embedded in the technology used, thus potentially recreating the inequity it ostensibly sought to remedy. He repeatedly turns back to the underlying questions of

DH rather than its applications, pursuing interesting theoretical questions that simultaneously frustrate the reader seeking more engagement with the current implementations of digital humanities, thus ensuring that the title's claim to "provocations" lives up to its name. His chosen path of inquiry, however, does very little to help those trying to determine how DH might be used for a proposed research project looking at eighteenth-century materials, for example; or how women, scholars of color, Indigenous scholars, or LGBTQ+ scholars might accomplish their research goals within the DH community. *On the Digital Humanities* instead oscillates between Ramsay's own theoretical and experiential spheres, offering up his own career and thoughts on the field he is immersed in, rather than engaging with current projects and practitioners.

On the one hand, Ramsay's concern and exhortation for DH not to lose its way seems dated. Perhaps that's fitting for essays collected over a decade and a half; in DH years, that is somewhere between two projects and a new generation of DH scholars ago, including almost unrecognizable shifts in technology since the first forays into hypertext and computational stylistics in the mid-nineties and earlier. If you are interested in the deeper "why" and "so what" behind the DH field, or a look into its beginnings, or even some thoughts on administrative or teaching experiences involving digital humanities, Ramsay's book will be an interesting foray into the lessons learned over a career that thus far runs the length of the twenty-first century in the field and then some. If you're looking for more of a "how" or "what" look at the current state, especially as pertains to women, gender, sexuality, and period-specific scholarship and projects in the digital humanities, this book might not be the right fit. Regardless, however, it is a thoughtful, interesting volume that provides excellent jumping-off points for discussions about the field as a whole.