

## DH Moments, Caribbean Considerations: On Reaction, Response, and Relevance in the Digital Humanities

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### Abstract

This essay was written specifically for NYCDHWeek 2018, the theme of which was *DH in the Moment: Reaction, Response, Relevance*. The author examines how we define digital humanities activism and how we frame its histories. Relying primarily on examples from Caribbean-oriented digital work, the author argues for a broad definition of DH activism that allows for a variety of projects and intended audiences. In particular, the essay responds to the tendency to focus on “DH in the moment” (projects that can be done quickly and yield a high social impact) as the primary form of activism, arguing that alongside such projects we include as activist projects that have a more cumulative and less immediate effect. Recently, we have begun to ask not just what the digital humanities does, but what the digital humanities does for others. This essay considers why it is that this has become a key question in this DH moment.

The theme for NYCDHWeek 2018 was *DH in the Moment: Reaction, Response, Relevance*, which the organizers note was designed to “consider the ways in which DH work can be extremely timely, political, and radical.”<sup>[1]</sup> Projects that spring immediately to mind as prime examples of such work might be the #PRMapathon initiative that began at Columbia University following the devastation of Hurricane Maria in late 2017, or the more recent, multi-layered #TornApart/#Separados data mapping in response to “the USA’s 2018 ‘Zero Tolerance Policy’ for asylum seekers at the US Ports of Entry and the humanitarian crisis that has followed” [Torn Apart 2018]. As Lindsay McKenzie pronounces, such “rapidly produced and highly topical digital humanities projects are challenging perceptions of the field” [McKenzie 2018] and are therefore drawing our attention to what the digital humanities can do “in the moment.”

There is much to be said for these projects, much that has already been said and more than I am capable of saying here on the technical, the practical, and the affective labors involved; but that won’t be my attempt in this essay. I focus, instead, on the fact of the current questioning of how the digital humanities can be “timely, political, and radical.” The timing of this question interests me because it was not a prevalent question even a decade ago. Judging from the focus of a majority of DH publications, which increased significantly approximately a decade ago, the prevalent question for many years was: What is the digital humanities?

We certainly haven’t answered that question to everyone’s — or maybe even anyone’s — satisfaction, but I find it more interesting that we are, in this moment, asking not just what the digital humanities does, but what the digital humanities does for others. For instance, in a recent article in *Inside Higher Ed* Will Fenton writes: “It’s time that digital humanists own their role as public humanists.... Framing digital work as public work raises important questions, not just about what we do, but where and for whom we do it” [Fenton 2018]. These questions mark a turn in the digital humanities, a turn that signifies an acceptance of space in the academy and ownership of a recognized (potential) public platform that now demands we do something with it.

In turning to this question of how we do what we may do for others in the digital humanities, I speak from a rootedness in Caribbean studies and I begin with a Caribbean-centered digital project from 10 years ago, a time when digital humanists (newly named as such) were realizing the institutionalization of the Digital Humanities. In 2007,

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commissioned by the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting, Ghanaian-Jamaican poet Kwame Dawes began research for a project on HIV/AIDS in Jamaica. Dawes' research resulted in traditional methods of reportage: a standard, albeit extended, essay for *The Virginia Quarterly* and two short documentaries for public television. Additionally, Dawes was inspired to create a collection of poetry from the experience and to perform the poems to music. Still unsatisfied with these results, Dawes further collaborated with the Pulitzer Center to create Live Hope Love, an interactive web project that combined much of the above materials, with additional video interviews, music and photography.

Before I delve into more details about the project, I want to say that I was hesitant to begin here because:

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- *Live Hope Love* was, to all appearances, a well-funded project, which is rare in cases of what may be defined as activist digital work, and
- It falls uneasily in that gray area between traditionally defined digital humanities work and new media.

But, in keeping with Roopika Risam's contention that given the many "earlier, oftunrecognized instances of digital humanities work that [engage] with difference," I agree that there are "alternate histories we must write about the digital humanities" [Risam 2015]. I want to write Dawes into this DH genealogy and therefore begin with the messy multimedia-ness of *Live Hope Love*. It is partially the project's straddling of this unclear division between media formats that makes it ideal as a paradigm of the ways that digital platforms are able to react, respond, and be relevant "in the moment."<sup>[2]</sup>

The digital is what enables the seamless hybridity of the *Live Hope Love* project, as well as the ethical navigation of the very real power differentials at play in a US-based report on HIV/AIDS in Jamaica. The "vital voices" of those "living with HIV/AIDS" — whether they have the virus themselves or are caregivers to those who do — are centered in the navigation of the site. In terms of technology, the poetry, documentary footage, video interviews, and performances are able to coexist coherently — the real alongside the poetic, critical alongside creative — within the design of the platform. The project itself is static, a closed aesthetic product, but it links back to the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting, where the continuous life of the project is captured via articles and videos related to Dawes' Jamaica research and links also to a similar project Dawes later conducts in Haiti.

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The web-based production of *Live Hope Love* allows for the results of Dawes' research in the HIV/AIDS community in Jamaica to be relatively easily available to the members of that community, for them to consume or use as desired or needed. It also allows for the stories of and from members of this community to be relatively accessible to those of us *outside* said community, both within and without Jamaican borders. Stories filtered, yes, in part by Dawes and his collaborators — the photographer and the musicians — but also the community members' stories in their own voices.

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The ethics of this presentation of Jamaicans living with HIV/AIDS is what makes the digital nature of this project so important. Though the entirety of the site does frame the video interviews, they can be played in any order and without the hierarchizing format of the documentary (for those who do want this fixed format, the two documentaries produced from Dawes' trips to Jamaica are also included on the site). *Live Love Hope* demonstrates how a digital platform can be designed to ethically respond to the needs of vulnerable and marginalized Caribbean communities while representing them from elsewhere.

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This is one face of DH Activism. It is not a workshoppable, immediately-produced, immediately-reproducible, lightning-fast-results form of activism, but it is nevertheless one attempt at redressing a social inequality and generating positive social change. And this is what I take this question of response and relevance to be about: redress of social inequalities and the making of positive social change. But this is not new to the digital humanities. At least, the question may be new, in this DH moment, but the practice is not. In particular, those of us in Caribbean studies, in black studies, in women's studies, who intersect with the digital humanities, have always already been invested in making our digital work relevant and responsive to the communities we work within.

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To speak about those intersections, I'd like to go back to that DH moment of institutionalization when many scholars were offering definitions of what DH is, was, could and should be. At the end of his much cited essay, "What Is Digital Humanities and What's It Doing in English Departments?," Matthew Kirschenbaum writes,

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Whatever else it might be, then, the digital humanities today is about a scholarship (and a pedagogy) that is publicly visible in ways to which we are generally unaccustomed, a scholarship and pedagogy that are bound up with infrastructure in ways that are deeper and more explicit than we are generally accustomed to, a scholarship and pedagogy that are collaborative and depend on networks of people and that live an active, 24-7 life online. [Kirschenbaum 2012]

This, of course, is not the definitive answer to Kirshchenbaum's titular question(s) but it aims to be as capacious as possible for that moment. There is, however, a notable absence of activism in this definition, indicative of the perspective of the field then. Kirschenbaum writes at a particular time in the institutionalization of the digital humanities, one during which it was becoming the "next big thing" and required much discussion of definition and borders, which activism necessarily blurs.

In the manner of the digital culture it is intimately engaged with, Digital Humanities itself undergoes change rapidly, so that now, only 8 years after that "moment of definition," we are once again asking questions of who we are and what it is we do. Specifically, how does DH work "in the moment" and why have our embraced definitions been noticeably devoid of an integrated activist component. But to ask such questions is to exclude, to return to Risam's phrasing, the many "earlier, oftunrecognized instances of digital humanities work that [engage] with difference." The "we" on the margins of those definitions of the Digital Humanities have been steadily hacking and yacking with our communities and with our communities' interests at the heart of our digital activities.

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In essence, it is not a coincidence that this question of how digital humanities work can be "timely, political, and radical" arises in tandem with an increased recognition of diversity in DH. Movements like #TransformDH, #dhpoco, FemTechNet, HASTAC, GO::DH, etc <sup>[3]</sup>—many of which think (or thought) activism alongside research and pedagogy—focus on members from marginalized communities who have used digital tools to further their voices and existence. The two (activism and "diversity") are inextricable. The "relevance" of DH, therefore, is not a new question for those who have relied on it as part of their activism, and who have incorporated their activism in their DH work. Black studies, gender studies, Caribbean studies are founded on the question of how academic research connects to the communities under study (at least when it is done well). In recognizing the contributions of these methodologies to DH (and vice versa), digital humanities is being forced to also recognize ways a definition based on scholarship and pedagogy reveals only part of the whole picture.

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In using the term "activism" in conjunction with the digital humanities, I am thinking more broadly perhaps than the standard definition of political activism. Rather, I am thinking along the lines of how Amy Earhart implicitly defines it in, "Can Information Be Unfettered? Race and the New Digital Humanities Canon." Earhart speaks of leveraging "materials and knowledge ... to change the social position of people of color"; in particular for the digital humanities, to use the "space of the Internet [to] allow those who [have] been silenced to have a voice" [Earhart 2012]. In this way, DH activism can form a necessary bridge between the lingering theory and practice divide of digital humanities. Asking not so much what it is you are doing, but rather, how does what you are doing serve to generate positive social change?

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To make concrete the range of how digital work within black studies largely, and Caribbean studies particularly, is already built on these questions of relevance to the community or communities at the center of the work, I offer below two very different examples of digital work committed to social change. First, Ruddy Roye, a Brooklyn-based photographer raised in Jamaica who as early as 2013, styled himself as an "Instagram activist"; and second, the Slave Societies Digital Archive, which since 2003 has "digitally preserve[d] endangered ecclesiastical and secular documents related to Africans and Afro-descended peoples in the Americas" [Sutton 2017].

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Ruddy Roye, already a photographer by trade for over a decade, embraced the affordances of the digital right after Hurricane Sandy hit New York. He headed out with his iPhone and subsequently posted images of the effects of the storm on Instagram. The gritty reality of Roye's images and the humanizing elements of his accompanying lengthy captions — unusual on the social media platform at the time — grew his following. His insistence on lengthy captions to add dimensions to his already-striking images on Instagram means he deliberately pushes against the boundaries of how the social media platform is "supposed" to be used, creating what Moya Bailey calls "digital alchemy." As Bailey

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writes:

Alchemy is the “science” of turning regular metals into gold. When I discuss digital alchemy I am thinking of the ways that women of color, Black women in particular, transform everyday digital media into valuable social justice media magic that recodes failed dominant scripts. [Bailey 2015]

“Social justice media magic” is what Ruddy Roye has been making with his Instagram account for the past five plus years. In an interview about his objectives with his work, Roye is not shy about his ambitions. He states, “a photographer once told me, about 13 years ago, that photography does not change anything. I have been trying to prove that photographer wrong ever since” [Grow 2014]. If anyone is using digital tools to react and respond and *make change* in the moment, it is certainly Ruddy Roye. In one of his trademark mini-essays on a 2017 Instagram post from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, he reflects on traditional works of art and what he calls “places that hold art,” asking: “who do we do this work for, what spaces should the work occupy, who gets to see the work, who gets to tell the work, and on what platform should the work be told to achieve maximum engagement?” These are the questions of community and access that identity-based studies have historically asked and that digital humanities scholars are asking more explicitly today. Roye’s own work with the digital implies some of the answers even as it merely clears space for him to continue asking the questions.

Moya Bailey’s theorization of digital alchemy grew from her work with black trans women and the ways they build community through and across digital platforms. Along with the concept of digital alchemy, Bailey presents in this article the ethics of such work; encouraging academics to think, from the outset, of designing a project with explicit questions about how what we do as scholars might affect the community or communities we study. In the spirit of Ruddy Roye, who insists that his photographs show his *collaborators* rather than his subjects, Bailey also involved members of the black trans community in designing her investigation of their use of digital platforms. She directly asked: how can this project answer not only my research questions, but also questions that black trans women themselves might have about their networks?

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Bailey positions this as a feminist approach to digital humanities work, but I would argue that it also grows out of the tenets of black studies, which has at its heart the historically activist mandate to work towards self-determination and self-definition for black peoples. With the institutionalization within the academy of departments and programs for Africana and African-Diasporic Studies and related fields, there is a growing community of scholars who themselves may be seen as the community for whom we do this work. That is, though the digital humanities may often overlap with “public humanities” and may be asking questions directly relevant to, or responding to, a non-academic audience, it is also possible for the intended audience to be specifically academic.

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I turn here back to the moment of defining DH; in his introduction to the 2012 edition of *Debates in the Digital Humanities*, Matthew Gold writes:

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Clearly, this is a significant moment of growth and opportunity for the field, but it has arrived amid larger questions concerning the nature and purpose of the university system. At stake in the rise of the digital humanities is not only the viability of new research methods (such as algorithmic approaches to large humanities data sets) or new pedagogical activities (such as the incorporation of geospatial data into classroom projects) but also key elements of the larger academic ecosystem that supports such work. [Gold 2012]

The larger questions of the “nature and purpose” of academia have come to include questions of activism and public intellectualism in recent years (both not least facilitated by the digital itself). It is not that activism is new to the university — think here of service learning courses as precursors — but that the public nature of digital humanities work, or the forced public nature of it, alongside a heavier emphasis on “assessment” and “outcomes,” has meant that the humanities must more transparently (and measurably) serve a tangible and visible purpose.

As unpopular as it may be to say it, however, we also have to serve ourselves. We — academics, humanists, Caribbeanists — have to make information and tools available to others in our discipline so that the discipline may itself

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survive to serve our students and, perhaps by extension, the larger public. As we increasingly recognize the integration of digital humanities into the interdisciplinary margins of the academy, we cannot afford to accept what Gold describes as the “fault line...between those who use new digital tools to aid relatively traditional scholarly projects and those who believe that DH is most powerful as a disruptive political force that has the potential to reshape fundamental aspects of academic practice” [Gold 2012]. In order to be disruptive, we must also shore up traditional forms of academic research and publication.

This is not a new argument and not my argument here. I draw attention to it in order to speak again to the question of relevance. The focus in that question of relevance tends to be too much on a non-academic public. Or rather, too much on the direct impact of a DH project or initiative on that *imagined* non-academic public. But that impact, that relevance, can — and in some cases, should — be a multi-step process. For example, a project like the Slave Societies Digital Archive is purposely directed toward researchers. Formerly known as the Ecclesiastical and Secular Sources for Slave Societies, the project is a preservation initiative housed at Vanderbilt University. It digitizes, and in some cases preserves in analog format, records from churches and municipal and provincial archives in what were the Iberian colonies in the Caribbean and Latin America. It is a massive archiving project that has at its heart the mission to provide “full and complete open global access to these documents. In particular, [for] researchers in and of Latin America and the Caribbean to have increased access to their own histories” [Sutton 2017]. According to Angela Sutton, project fellow at Vanderbilt, “The availability of these records has allowed historians, both academic and public, to re-create the histories of Cuba and Brazil in a more representative fashion, centering on the Africans whose forced labor built these nations.” 2017 “Google Analytics reports show that the ESSSS site received nearly 50,000 unique visitors monthly” and the digitized “records have been and are currently being used to produce [several] doctoral dissertations and master’s theses” as well as course content and teaching tools. Such digital projects as the Slave Societies Digital Archive, then, are responding directly to a research-based, or pedagogical, need rather than an explicit public need, though the line between academic and public audience cannot in most cases be firmly drawn.

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However, the positioning of an academic audience as the direct beneficiary of a digital project, particularly a project designed to speak to the needs of research on communities underrepresented in academic spaces, is an activist mission in itself. The success of Caribbean scholars is a part of my own objective with *sx salon* and was a major part of the conversation when I worked with Alex Gil, Kaiama Glover, and Dennis Tenen on refining the ideology and design of *sx archipelagos*. In particular, we prioritized access to research material, mentoring, and publication opportunities for scholars from outside the US. In asking what it is that the Digital Humanities does for the nebulous public, we run the risk of overlooking this very important community of scholars who need support in generating positive social change in the classroom. Admittedly, my understanding of the question of relevance and activism in the Digital Humanities is supported by, and inseparable from, my commitment to Caribbean studies. My choices to use digital tools for research, digital methods of analysis, and digital dissemination and presentation of scholarship are already tied to a much earlier decision to center the Caribbean and Caribbean peoples in spaces my training gives me the privilege to occupy; whether that be the classroom, or digital platforms, or this journal.

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Having been too often in the position of claiming and justifying space for Caribbean literature in English departments, and for Caribbean studies in interdisciplinary spaces, I understand the efforts at defining the digital humanities for academic gatekeepers skeptical of what DH is and does. And I understand the desire to define for ourselves the relevance of the work we do for the communities we engage with and belong to. But, we need to be careful of how we frame the current attention to DH activism. Careful that in our framing of this moment, we don’t write a history of the digital humanities that excludes projects like Kwame Dawes’ *Live Hope Love* and Thomas Spears’ long-running Francophone site, *Ile-en-Ile*, projects that have always had contemporary communal self-determination and the betterment of the lived experiences of marginalized peoples at the center of their mission. Careful that we don’t relegate projects like the Slave Societies Digital Archive or publications like *sx archipelagos* to outside this “moment” or irrelevant to activist genealogies because their explicit audience is academic.

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These are some additional dimensions of the reaction, response and relevance of digital humanities that I wish to insist not only into the histories of DH, but also into the now now now of workshop weeks and lightning-fast, immediate-results-oriented activism. To present a deeper and broader picture of what it means to depend on the digital to redress

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social inequality and generate positive social change. This defining DH moment corresponds with increasing recognition of work being done by digital humanists already committed to diverse minority communities and, therefore, it goes beyond questions of building vs interpreting, beyond who's in and who's out. One can "hack or yack" all one wants, but if either is divorced from a real-time community, then what use is it?

Engaging with real-time communities, however, necessitates caution, with all forms of DH activism, that we don't in our rush to be "timely, political, and radical" become a cadre of privileged DHers "doing for" underprivileged populations in ways that make us feel relevant; and then patting ourselves on the back (while also accepting the rewards and accolades of the academy) for our benevolence. The caution is that, like Roye and Bailey, we collaborate with our communities, rather than see them as subjects of our work.

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In closing, I'd like to turn to a different defining moment, this time in Caribbean studies. In a special issue on "What is Caribbean Studies," David Scott asks:

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What is the picture that informs our various imaginaries (scholarly, fictive, visual, poetic) of the Caribbean as a space of investigation? What is the content of the form of that image and what is the rhetorical labor that it performs? What is the *point* (political, conceptual, disciplinary, moral) of mobilizing this particular image, rather than some other, of the Caribbean in these particular discourses? [Scott 2013]

It's not a one-to-one analogy, but I think the theme of this NYCDH week — DH in the Moment: Reaction, Response, Relevance — is asking a similar question of the digital humanities. What is the image we have of the digital humanities? What is the image we have of who we are and what we do and how what we do might be in service with and for our various other communities? What is the *point* of imaging ourselves thus, of defining ourselves in this way at this moment? And how might it spur us to change this thing we call the digital humanities?

In some ways, I am asking us to revisit the question of "what is the digital humanities" from the perspective not so much of what we do, but what we do *for* and *with* our diverse publics. In clearly defining our digital humanities efforts in terms of audience and communities, we can more ethically engage with those audiences and communities, and more ethically serve both our and their needs for information and digital tools and platforms.

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## Notes

[1] This essay was originally presented as the keynote lecture at the NYCDH week 2018, for which the theme was: DH in the Moment: Reaction, Response, Relevance. I have left much of the reference to that theme intact as it is central to my overall argument.

[2] Also, it won a Webby. So in 2009, at least, that made it legit digital.

[3] My thanks to Alex Gil for this list, almost verbatim, as an expansion on the breadth and diversity of such movements.

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