


“For the master’s [DH] tools will never dismantle the master’s house”: An Alternative Primer for a Critical Black DH Praxis

Angel David Nieves <a_dot_nieves_at_northeastern_dot_edu>, Northeastern University  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9861-3718>

Abstract

Building on an earlier e-Black studies manifesto from the late aughts, this paper outlines a Black DH, that as a social movement and as a political project challenges without hesitation or apology a still white-dominated field of digital humanities – and is resolute concerning its commitment to racial justice. As Moya Bailey, Kim Gallon, and Jessica Marie Johnson have argued elsewhere, Black DH should be simultaneously experimental, analytical, computational, speculative, and have unique design capabilities as a series of practices and speculative exercises. This paper proposes guidelines or principles to assist this and makes clear that the process of scholarly inquiry with Black knowledge-making, and discovery takes precedent over final product. This praxis is possible if we promote collaborative co-creation models of teaching, research, and service for the humanities in an interdisciplinary framework that centers and helps prioritize Black women and queer voices and perspectives in Black DH work.

Black Lives Matter. Black Women’s Lives Matter. The lives of Black women such as Saartjie Baartman, Anna Julia Cooper, Charlotte Maxeke, Victoria Earle Matthews, Antoinette Sithole, Pauline Hopkins, and Winnie Madikizela-Mandela have mattered greatly. Yet, for many, these names mean very little. For others, many of these women were pioneers, and some might even argue, Afro-Futurists, women who seemingly anticipated the urgency of DH debates during these pandemic-ridden times, who looked at progress, social change, and world-building in Black communities well before others of their day. As a scholar of race, gender, and the built environment, I could not help but have Black women’s lives matter to me. In the U.S. and South Africa (where much of my current scholarly work is situated) the lives of Black women in racial uplift have always been critical, but have never been properly valued, documented, or recognized. Black women’s lives matter in both of these geo-political contexts because of the labor they contributed in the making of the empires of both the English in colonial America and the Dutch in the Cape Colony of Southern Africa. These histories cannot continue to be ignored, erased, overlooked, or silenced without making certain of the many contributions that were made at great personal and collective costs by so many Black and Brown women – these same women who ultimately found ways to begin dismantling the legacy of settler-colonialism [Nieves 2020]. These histories are unique in many significant ways, but the tools of white supremacy, racial capitalism, and genocide are very much the common thread that stitches these living tableaux together. I remind you what Audre Lorde once wrote:

For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. Racism and homophobia are real conditions of all our lives in this place and time. I urge each one of us here to reach down into that deep place of knowledge inside herself and touch that terror and loathing of any difference that lives here. See whose face it wears. Then the personal as the political can begin to illuminate all our choices.

[Lorde 2007]

I have, since 2004, been working in South Africa on a series of digital projects informed by community-driven participatory practices. That work has raised a number of issues for me, and what I consider to be some of the core values that are needed today when working in Black DH – values especially informed by feminist and intersectional

epistemologies. Working to establish a series of foundational guidelines for this work reminds me that I was the signatory of an earlier call to action, the “eBlack Studies Manifesto”, sponsored by the African-American Studies Department at the University of Illinois Urbana in 2008 that defines eBlack studies as “the ongoing application of current digital information technology towards the production, dissemination, and collection of historical knowledge critical to the discipline of Black Studies and to the overall black experience” [Alkalimat, et al. 2008]. The authors, of whom I was just one out of fifteen, outlined nine imperatives to guide and grow the fledgling discipline. Some 16+ years later we have grown eBlack Studies significantly, despite daunting challenges faced during the economic crisis of that same year in 2008, and the subsequent global recession.

For me, a queer scholar of color who still cannot easily separate my everyday lived reality from my activist and social justice-based pedagogies – the kind of activism that embraces the “personal is political” – I am often left to wonder how scholarly practice for some in the ivory tower are just what they do from 9am to 5pm, Monday through Friday. As a Black DH practitioner who cannot ignore my own positionality as a scholar of color, I do not see a neat separation between my day-to-day lived reality from my digital practices. And as I write this short reflection piece, we are once again facing a global crisis, a pandemic, brought on by COVID-19 that has impacted Black and Brown people, here in the U.S., and across the African Diaspora, in disproportionate numbers. We might never know the full extent of the damage done by the pandemic because of the mis-handling and willful neglect of the necessary data to more fully and qualitatively document its impact.

So, what is possible when those who have long been the victims of racial hatred, violence, and segregation learn to harness the “master’s tools”? I urge us to consider a new way forward, for a Black DH, that as a social movement and as a political project once again challenges the still white-dominated field of digital humanities without hesitation or apology – and is unapologetic about its commitment to racial justice. Black DH, as Moya Bailey, Kim Gallon, and Jessica Marie Johnson have argued elsewhere, should be simultaneously experimental, analytical, computational, speculative, and have unique design capabilities as a series of practices and in shaping the field’s future [Bailey 2015] [Day 2020][Johnson 2018]. In response, we have already seen large-scale efforts, often funded by Foundations outside the academy, to address the kind of disciplinary focus of, and adherence to the dominant fields and tools created in support of a very Eurocentric-focused model for digital humanities – something we continue to see at our yearly international Association of Digital Humanities Organizations (ADHO) conference with significant pushback from our European colleagues who disavow race as a legitimate category of analysis or humanistic inquiry [Ciotti 2017].

Fortunately we have been able to break free from that white-male centered, heteronormative, overtly text-based monolingual analytic focus, making significant inroads through DH2018 in Mexico City and other interventions across the Americas, the Caribbean, and digital projects that readily engage with racial justice including the African American History, Culture, and Digital Humanities (AADHUM) program at the University of Maryland-College Park; the Colored Conventions Project (CCP) at the Pennsylvania State University; the Forum on Digital Ethnic Studies at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln; and the History of Black Writing (HBW) at the University of Kansas-Lawrence, and the Reckonings Project at Northeastern University. Each of these institutions is making significant progress in training students and modeling the kind of scholarship that is currently needed to address racial and systemic inequalities in digital humanities. With institutional support, and alliances with one or two senior faculty who have also leveraged their positions in their respective fields (along with their reputations), Black DH is becoming more “mainstream.” However, it is still seen at many institutions as niche or the result of digital faddism, or worse, is subject to the pressures of neo-liberal administrators seeking new funding streams for embattled Black, African American, and Africana Studies Programs and/or Departments. Rectifying the financial and socio-political imbalance of Black, African American, and Africana Studies Programs and/or Departments must come along with the full embrace of digital humanities. All this still impedes a clear way forward for Black DH without some sort of agreed upon set of practices, community building strategies, and new knowledge-making frameworks. Fortunately, this special issue of *DHQ* that looks ahead and features the work of a new generation of digital scholars, provides us with the sorts of examples where Black DH is now heading.

Therefore, much like the “eBlack Studies Manifesto”, I too propose a set of key practices, an alternative primer, for Black DH projects in this special issue. I propose that we in the Black DH community consider these ten principles of practice:

1. Build opportunities to promote collaborative co-creation models of teaching and research, while also understanding that collaboration requires a VERY different conception of project timelines, workflows, deliverables, and expectations when undertaking a Black DH project;
2. Find ways to address the need for multi-layered, messy, truth-telling narratives about the Black experience across the African Diaspora that confront embedded legacies of race, racism, and anti-Blackness;
3. Value the process of scholarly inquiry, Black knowledge-making, and discovery over the final product;
4. Study power, privilege, and access as a series interconnected technologies that have been used to disempower Black communities, narratives, and forms of cultural production and that require a different way forward for practicing a Black DH (for eg. understanding power and how best to address power relations);
5. Help librarians, archivists, and information specialists working to advance Black DH projects/scholarship to embrace their own positionality;
6. Harness the breadth of digital expertise, in Black social media, and Black software and hardware design while developing new forms of digital scholarship;
7. Promote an ethics of care in Black DH practices, especially in teaching and research;
8. Articulate new DEI (diversity, equity and inclusion) opportunities and programs to coincide with the making of a range of Black DH projects, especially in the service of racial and social justice;
9. Develop a complex theoretical and applied Black DH framework where Black politics and ideologies are embedded in its methods, pedagogies, and research practices;
10. Center and immediately prioritize Black women and queer voices and perspectives in Black DH.

I started this essay naming some of the many women from across the African Diaspora who have influenced my own feminist digital scholarly praxis and who deserve further research. Finding ways of bridging Black women's lived realities while also attempting to articulate some guidelines for doing the work of Black DH (and embracing the phrase, "the personal is political") is worthy of discussing and debating further, but only as to those next, actionable steps. Inaction is not acceptable. "Pearl clutching", hand-wringing, and talking things to their untimely demise can no longer be the default. Instead, institutions of higher education must pivot from their dependence on soft-money "support" (on external monies that do not necessarily seed long-term pedagogical change) and, instead, begin now to endow student and community-based Black DH practices. We must find more creative long-term funding strategies that help us pay community partners for their time and labor on projects, if we are serious about acknowledging their contributions in co-creation. It is said that for every crisis there exists also an opportunity. Today's pandemic and economic downturn mark exactly the right moment to make these steps part of every institution's new set of priorities over the next decade.

7

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