Caribbean Futures in Black DH

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Abstract

The author reflects upon the intersection of Caribbean studies and "Black DH", exploring issues of hierarchies and Eurocentricity, as well as recent conferences and projects which exist in the aforementioned intersection.

Consistent with my recent reflections on the work – the material labor – of dreaming in digital,[1] I want to focus here on possibility. Like many before me, I began working at the intersection of the humanities and technology from a place of optimistic anticipation. The phrase "the affordances of the digital" tripped lightly over my tongue and the opportunities for differently ordering – for expanding – my intellectual world at first appeared endless. But then, of course (and also like many before me), I quickly came to recognize the perils of wading naively into the waters of DH, the relative ease with which the very hierarchies and exclusions that have long underpinned analog scholarship are reiterated in the digital realm.

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As a researcher in the field of Caribbean studies with particular grounding in francophone literature and culture, my forays into the digital have been largely site-specific. They reflect, accompany, and emerge from the preoccupations that inform my traditional research and teaching – the monographs and articles I have published, the courses I have designed over the last two decades. I have been committed to the persistent unsettling of centers and margins – those that determine the parameters of belonging within the academy as the principal site of knowledge production and circulation, and those that make or deny space along explicitly and implicitly racialized lines. While thinking within this frame has meant contesting the university's foundational Eurocentricity, I have in fact been most interested in querying the forms of intramural border-drawing that persist within the field of Black studies – notably, the tendency to position of US-American blackness as stand-in for the global Black experience, and the not-unrelated phenomenon of Anglophone monolinguality.

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Thus, when I think about ideal futures for Black studies and the digital humanities, and about the ways I might contribute to crafting those futures, I think primarily from the space of the Afro-Americas. This is certainly not to suggest that shifting focus from the US-American space to the Caribbean archipelago would on its own constitute an ideal. Rather, it is to express my hope that thinking the Caribbean idiosyncratically in my digital work can contribute to widening and nuancing understandings of "blackness" in the hemispheric Americas and beyond. This has entailed relying on Caribbean epistemologies to build digital products: that is, keeping front of mind Martinican writer-intellectual Edouard Glissant's interconnected term-concepts *opacity, relation,* and *rhizomatic thinking*; Jamaican writer-intellectual Sylvia Wynter's call to embrace oppositional forms of life – plots that challenge the plantation order; and Barbadian writer-intellectual Kamau Brathwaite's very notion of the archipelago as space of "submarine unity" – among other modes of thinking community in the shadow of empire, of naming and interrogating phenotypical and class diversity among racialized beings.

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It has also meant working to develop the mechanisms we need as Caribbeanists in order to be in conversation despite the linguistic and disciplinary silos that in many ways constrain Black participation in the academy. It has meant exploiting the "shine" of DH to direct resources and to accord deserved prestige to colleagues and communities that are

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crucial to but rarely enjoy the privileges of the work being done in North Atlantic institutions.

My efforts to address these concerns – to make resources "reach" into Caribbean spaces – are reflected in the various initiatives my collaborators and I have worked to build, sustain, and grow in the last decades.[2] Leveraging, yes, the affordances of the digital, we have created platforms for both collaboration and accreditation among Caribbeanist DHers: an annual hybrid international conference devoted to collectively examining and amplifying digital Caribbean theory and praxis; an online peer-reviewed journal that showcases the extraordinary work produced within this community of scholars and practitioners of the digital; and a set of mapping visualizations designed to facilitate understandings of the Caribbean within a global frame, among else.

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The annual conference, The Caribbean Digital,[3] is an international event hosted annually at locations in the United States and the Caribbean since 2014. This event has created a singular and consistent space of exchange for Caribbeanist digital scholars, consisting of traditional panels, roundtable conversations, skills-building workshops, and project show-and-tells. The work done in preparation for this gathering and/or produced in its wake has led to the publication of more than 30 peer-reviewed scholarly articles and digital projects as well as to the development of several ongoing digital artifacts, including a collectively generated bibliography, a collective translation, a keyword project, and a directory of Caribbeanist digital projects. [4]

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archipelagos journal [5] is a born-digital, peer-reviewed publication created in 2016 to "discern the ways in which the digital may enhance and transform our comprehension of the regional and diasporic Caribbean." We created this platform both as a space for theorists and practitioners of the Caribbean digital to produce and share knowledge, and as a peer-review model that ensures the recognition and reward of this scholarship by the profession. Fully open access and infrastructurally lightweight, the journal was designed with sustainability of all sorts in mind.

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Our most recent project, the cartographic digital visualization *In the Same Boats*,[6] takes up the challenge of scholarly communication across the nation-language borders that are the legacies of European empire. It offers a series of individual maps built on a common template to produce a synthesizing illustration of the connections undergirding Black knowledge production from the twentieth century to the present. *Same Boats* lowers the barrier to entry for "digi-curious" Caribbeanists and other scholars of the African diaspora; to participate in this digital (ad)venture requires only the ability to enter data into a spreadsheet. Moreover, and as with all of our projects, it is open access and the back-end is transparent, its code on offer to any who would ask.

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I think of these platforms as so many invitations extended to a widely dispersed and unevenly resourced Caribbeanist intellectual community. They are meant to provide sites of exchange less bound by the logistical, bureaucratic, and financial demands of physical displacement. All of these projects have made use where possible of minimal computing, so to be maximally accessible to communities of scholars working outside of well-resourced institutions or in contexts where infrastructural support (electricity, stable internet service) is less reliable. All of them have welcomed contributions from all the languages of the Caribbean. Most recently, we have sought and been awarded significant funding[7], making it possible not only for us to subsidize costs for community members seeking to participate in events involving travel, and to provide translation for our published content and interpretation for our in-person gathering, but also to directly distribute resources through sub-awards to Caribbean institutions and a micro-granting program.

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There are, of course, aspects of our Caribbean digital futures that are still hindered by contemporary imperialist realities. The United States remains the magnetic center of the Americas. As such, even the most progressive scholarly pursuits – be they digital or analog – are conditioned by a North Atlantic frame that tends to think blackness, linguistically, in English and, culturally, as a minority identity. If we shift the frame south into the Caribbean and Latin America, however, vastly different expressions and experiences of blackness become legible. Our challenge as Caribbeanist digital scholars is to continue pushing toward that decentered frame in Black studies, to use technology as a means of substantively collaborating and sharing resources with colleagues situated outside of the U.S., and to advocate for multilinguality and translation. Only in so doing can we hope to create Afro-diasporic systems of knowledge production in the digital humanities that reflect inclusively humanist interests and values, highlight diverse contributions, and

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nourish the widest range of dreams.

Notes

[1] I refer here to my co-authored chapter, "On the Interpretation of Caribbean Digital Dreams," for the volume *The Digital Black Atlantic*, Roopika Risam and Kelly Baker Josephs, eds. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2021: 225-35). In this essay, my co-author Alex Gil and I discuss the experience of collaborating across the humanist-technologist divide, paying particular attention to the material costs – the human and capital resources – that are too-often hidden to the view of members of the professoriate taking their first steps into digital scholarship.

[2] Alex Gil and Kelly Baker Josephs have been my primary collaborators since my very first forays in to digital scholarship. Every one of the projects named below has been realized in partnership with one of both of these scholars.

[3] http://caribbeandigitalnyc.net/2021/

[4] https://wayback.archive-it.org/1914/20151224014504/http://cesairelegacies.cdrs.columbia.edu/researchathon/; https://via.hypothes.is/https://cahier1939ms.github.io/texts/translation/; http://caribbeandigitalnyc.net/2020/keywords/; http://caribbeandigitalnyc.net/2020/directory/

[5] https://archipelagosjournal.org/

[6] http://sameboats.org

[7] https://barnard.edu/news/barnard-college-receives-5m-grant-andrew-w-mellon-foundation