

Looking Backward and Forward: Pleasure, Joy, and the Future of Black DH

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Abstract

This reflection provides a brief examination of Black DH genealogy. Focusing on a set of significant moments and events in the origin of Black DH provides an opportunity to showcase how it has been central to the development of the broader digital humanities field. Moreover, this select survey of Black DH reveals a pattern of work that utilizes a “technology of recovery” to restore the humanity of Black people through digital projects that center social justice but neglect joy and pleasure.

If we were to create a timeline of significant events in the rise of the digital humanities, then 2008 would certainly be a year of great importance. The National Endowment for the Humanities announced the creation of a new office: The Office of Digital Humanities. However, an event that might be missed in the genealogy of the digital humanities and significance of 2008 is that a month later the conference, “Digital Diasporas: Digital Humanities and African American/African Diaspora Studies” occurred at the University of Maryland from April 30th to May 3rd. “Digital Diasporas” was the first conference of its kind to bring together the fields of digital humanities and African American/African Diaspora Studies, though certainly not the first efforts to establish a relationship between Blackness and digital technologies in the Academy. For that origin story, we might look to 1983 and *The History of Black Writing (HBW) Project* by Maryemma Graham. As an early Black digital humanities (Black DH) project, the HBW project, then known as “The Computer Assisted Analysis of Black Literature,” recovered Black writing through a comprehensive checklist and database. Thus, in 2008, the “Digital Diasporas” conference was a manifestation of decades of work by Graham and other Black scholars in charting a relationship between digital technologies and knowledge about the Black experience.

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Ten years later, in 2018, the “Intentionally Digital, Intentionally Black” conference, which also took place at the University of Maryland from October 18th to October 20th in 2018, expanded the connection between the digital humanities and Blackness. For example, the Digital Diasporas conference featured Alexander G. Weheliye’s project, “Black Studies and the Digital Archive” which sought to expand the contours of the field with the digital life of resources on Blackness. “Intentionally Digital, Intentionally Black,” also featured projects and scholarship which examined the ways that gender, race and technology operate online through Black women’s use of social media as represented by the panel, “Always at Work: Black Women Online.” In addition, This Code Cracks: A #BlackCodeStudies roundtable featured Marisa Parham who presented her work, “.break.dance” a project that explores the interplay between Blackness, time, space, and digital experiences through basic web technologies such as html, javascript, and css. These two events, separated by a decade, highlights the ways Black Studies scholars have not simply kept apace but also anticipated the development of the digital humanities as a field, and more importantly the rise of Black DH. In essence, Black DH work has consistently been on the cutting edge of the digital humanities.

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Presently, a list of over 400 projects and scholarship, that is maintained by the “Colored Conventions Project”, indicates the growth of Black DH that demonstrates the value of the work that recovers and restores Black humanity. Yet, even as we continue to see exciting work in Black DH emerge, there are only a few projects that center topics such as Black pleasure and sexuality. Many projects on the list are focused on Black people’s historical and contemporary struggle for

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liberation. This should not surprise the avid student of the Black experience. In some sense, Black DH has followed the trajectory of traditional scholarship on the Black life and its investment in heteronormative values and respectability politics that tend to focus on Blackness in relationship to the struggles for social justice.

Still, the outlook for work that examines expansive notions of Blackness is bright when we look at a small but growing body of Black DH undertakings. For example, Camille Lawrence’s project, the “Black Beauty Archives” takes up beauty culture in the African diaspora through digitized images of beauty tools, magazines, and advertisements and creates a digital space where pleasure and joy are located, shaped, and developed from Black aesthetics. Similarly, “The Black Lesbian Archives” by Krü Maekdo uses music, videos, and still images to powerfully archive and curate the rich history of Black lesbians’ lives and experiences throughout the United States and beyond. Finally, LaShawn Pittman’s “Real Black Grandmothers” not only offers a digital archive of Black grandmothers’ lifesaving role in Black communities but provides an opportunity for people to playfully participate in the cultivation of a digital space where Black grandmother wit and “sayings” are preserved and shared through Twitter.

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Together, these three projects represent the future of Black DH through digital humanists’ use of digital technologies to recover the joy and pleasure of Blackness.

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Works Cited



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