



Black Digital Humanities for the Rising Generation

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Abstract

The relative youth of Black DH as a field has allowed it to be born radical. While some fields have more conservative traditions that they must break free from, Black DH has been able to forge a more inclusive path. The focus of Black DH and this special issue is not to define Black DH, but rather spotlight the limitless, interdisciplinary nature of Black DH and Black scholarship. Both article and metareflection authors alike build upon lineages of Black studies, feminist, queer, and womanist scholars, forging new paths using their innovative methodologies as they examine, construct, and reimagine innovative communities and people.

Framing Black Digital Humanities

We conceptualized and proposed this issue shortly after the 2018 *Intentionally Digital, Intentionally Black* conference held by University of Maryland's Center for African American History, Culture, and Digital Humanities (AADHum), co-organized by Catherine Knight Steele and Trevor Muñoz. One of the core challenges expressed by scholars was the limited legibility of their work in DH, a field that is predominantly white. Their work was often categorized as outside of DH, borrowing DH tools and applied them to other self-contained fields. Scholars noted how this impacted their ability to secure academic jobs, get published, or even be granted tenure. There are tangible and serious consequences to not recognizing the work of Black scholars as well as not validating methodologies and projects that center Black subjects in DH. 1

Over the past four years digital humanities scholars have committed to antiracism and feminism, calling for a more equitable field/ Black Digital Humanities has blossomed. Black DH scholars who have helped shape the field — such as Catherine Knight Steele, André Brock, and Moya Bailey — have published books with NYU, MIT, and other well-established presses. There has also been a rise in Black DH and media studies positions. 2

However, we must still work to center Black digital humanists and scholars; this work is ongoing and necessary, especially in the face of anti-Black violence in academia and digital spaces. We also recognize that there are inequities within Black DH projects, and limited funding also means limited opportunity. Even with a stream of new lines of hire, the academic job market remains unstable. Coupled with issues of retention and the abuses and exploitations faced by Black scholars, even those that can finally be put into productive positions find themselves pushed to the margins of academia. Precarity is rife, but each day we marvel at how these scholars resist and center themselves and their colleagues. We imagine this special issue as a hub of that resistance. In a fight against white-supremacy, sexism, and ableism, we stand with other scholars of Black DH and we work towards a more equitable world. 3

The past four years have changed beyond just the scope of Black DH. We knew that undertaking a project like this would be major — it is nearly four years in the making. Building a special issue takes time even in perfect conditions. We and the writers of this issue saw cataclysmic shifts — the Covid-19 pandemic, racial reckonings, volatile presidencies, and the Russian-Ukrainian war. Much has changed. It is no surprise that despite the pandemic's hinderings and the overall global conflicts and violence, Black people have been able to organize, work, and bond. Our authors wrote mostly before and in the midst of these events, and may not have been able to fully or directly attend to 4

this in their work. We ask that you read these in good faith, and know that the omission was not intentional. Instead we ask that you read the articles and think about how they might help yourself and others better understand the contemporary moment. Reading the articles and metareflections published in this special issue at this time should urge you to think in new ways about how Black DH projects can be revelatory of larger issues. For example, Bryan M. Jenkin's and Taryn K. Myers' work on Black Podcasts is helpful in explaining why centering Black voices and opinions is critical to understanding our current political climate. Dr. Ravynn K. Stringfield's work on Black women's social networks exposes how they build community and support one another in the face of adversity— building a framework for how we might *all* work together to uplift each other.

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5

Process

In this special issue — from the original brainstorming to the final publication — we committed to Black digital humanities and larger Black feminist methodologies and practices for collaboration. Because this SI is specifically focused on the future of Black DH, which meant specifically inviting early-career scholars to publish, we committed to demystifying the publication process and disciplinary knowledges, pushing against the opaque writing and reviewing process that often manufactures barriers for graduate students, especially Black graduate students.

6

For us, citational politics have been critical in how we think and practice our scholarship. Taking cues from scholars like Jessica Marie Johnson, Moya Bailey, and André Brock, we always cite where we can (and not just when necessary) and we take joy in building up scholarship and creating networks of thought. As we note below, we also encourage our writers to do the same.

7

Recently, several scholars came together to compile “Anti-Racist Scholarly Reviewing Practices: A Heuristic for Editors, Reviewers, and Authors,” a set of anti-racist scholarly reviewing practices with specific steps editors, reviewers, and authors can implement into their everyday work. The goal of this document is to invite inclusive and equitable practices, rather than reproducing gatekeeping. Even though this document was not available during our reviewing process, we implemented several of these practices as they align with our own methodologies and commitments. We encourage editors, reviewers, and authors in digital humanities to take seriously these anti-racist practices. In our commitment to this anti-racist process that centers Black knowledges, experiences, and methodologies, we use this space to explain our own editorial process — a process we hope others take on, whether invested in Black DH, anti-racism, or changing academia.

8

Transparent Submission & Proposal Process

When we proposed the special issue, we chose a workflow that allowed for scholars, especially early career scholars, to learn about the peer review and publication process. The call for proposals invited scholars to submit a short description of their planned article; this meant less work up front for potential authors. In the original call for proposals, we also invited interested scholars to join proposal workshops.

9

Workshopping & Writing Sessions

The first workshop, which we held twice, centered around attendees drafting their proposals and asking us questions. In this workshop we described the proposal process, shared the criteria we were planning to use to evaluate the proposals, provided a longer description of the publication process, and answered any questions from attendees. Most of the attendees submitted proposals. The “Workshop for Proposals” handout is available for further reading.

10

Once proposals were accepted, we also hosted a series of writing sessions before the contributors submitted their articles to be peer reviewed. These writing sessions allowed contributors to carve out time to write, ask us questions, and continue to learn about the peer review and special issue process. During these workshops and writing sessions, we had a chance to build community with the authors, learning not only about their articles but their values, goals, and

11

overall research.

Feedback on Drafts

Before the contributors sent their proposals in for peer review, we also provided a round of feedback. We hoped not only to continue fostering the community we built through the workshops and writing sessions, but also wanted to play a part in ensuring articles would receive the most productive, careful, and thoughtful feedback. We read through each article and provided feedback in regards to citational politics, organization, the development of important ideas, and ethical research practices. We pointed to Moya Bailey's "#transform(ing)DH Writing and Research: An Autoethnography of Digital Humanities and Feminist Ethics" as a guide for ethical, feminist online research [Bailey 2015].

12

Recognizing Labor and Limitations

Composing a special issue, writing articles and metareflections, peer reviewing, and editing all take an enormous amount of mostly uncompensated labor. This uncompensated labor, though, scratches the surface for what the past four years has brought upon Black academics and Black communities. First, COVID-19 has devastated Black and Latinx communities [Opiel et al. 2020]. Even the CDC's lack of transparency with surveillance data demonstrates how data collection can continuously harm Black people or hide the violence Black people face, as Angel David Nieves addresses in his metareflection. Second, the state-sactioned murders of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd led to the demand from institutions for Black scholars, practitioners, writers, and workers to address anti-Blackness. Suddenly, the expected labor for Black academics doubled and tripled, often with no offers for compensation. Because of this, we were constantly communicating with the article and metareflection authors, offering flexible deadlines, space to ask questions, and words of encouragement. This special issue is the product of an immense amount of labor, from the editors to the reviewers to the authors.

13

Organization of this Special Issue

When we first envisioned the make up of this issue we knew that we wanted to highlight our brilliant peers and that we wanted to give our readers a sense of what was to come in Black Digital Humanities. While highlighting the work of brilliant scholars such as Ravynn K. Stringfield, Romi Ron Morrison, and Brienne A. Adams among others, we also realized that their work rested on the scholarship of a previous generation of scholars that blazed the trails that they walked across. In order to acknowledge this we have enlisted several advanced scholars, including Moya Bailey, Kim Gallon, and Kaiama L. Glover to write *metareflections*. These short essays gave them the space to meditate and reflect on their own work and the larger DH field. They also allow for the scholars to imagine its future as well as the concerns and optimism they have for the future of Black Digital Humanities.

14

The digital humanities often evades containment to a single genre. Whether it be a web only project, digital dissertation, or the building of a digital archive or respiratory, it is nearly impossible to set a rigid guideline to how each project should be composed. We gave our writers free reign to write whatever they wanted, however they wanted to compose their work. Some of our articles take on a standard journal article frame, while others are insights into digital archives or podcasts, some are intended to be used as pedagogical tools, and others offer outline methodologies for others to take up in their work. The unique format of each article puts into practice the exact sort of thinking that the creator implores for its readers.

15

Although the genres are distinct, they coalesce together under shared themes — the importance of recovering, recording, and preserving historical data and objects; recognizing spaces for uplift and joy; and spotlighting the brilliance of Black folks and their extensive contributions to technology. These themes themselves are all interconnected. The collection of objects and data assure that Black people's contributions to technology (and beyond) are minted, and there is a certain level of joy and community that is built around that work — a great example of this are the scholars behind the Colored Conventions Project. As editors, we brought these pieces together in hopes that our readers would show the multitudes of Black DH scholarship, while also learning more about what brings them together, and what forms the tenets of the field.

16

Articles

This special issue emphasizes how Black scholars, Black content creators, and allies of Black scholars and content creators are always-already using digital technologies and tools in innovative, feminist, humanistic, and activist ways. As Catherine Knight Steele emphasizes in her introduction to her exciting 2022 book *Digital Black Feminism*:

17

Black women online [are] purveyors of digital skill and expertise, not deficient or in need to new skills to survive...Black women without extensive programming experience have maximized platform affordances, built transmedia platforms, led platform migrations, pushed platform policy changes regarding hate speech and content moderation, and introduced us to new pay structures as precursors to influencer culture [Steele 2021, 2].

Steele's celebration of Black women is reflected throughout several of the contributors' articles and reflections.

18

The article contributors to this issue demonstrate both their own innovative approaches to digital spaces. Franny Gaede, Ana-Maurine Lara, Alai Reyes-Santos, and Kate Thornhill apply decolonial methodologies in creating a digital archive of Afro-Indigenous women healers in the Caribbean, centering cultural awareness in all aspects of the project. Similarly, Jazma Sutton and Kalani Craig incorporate "descendant archival practice" in the building and analysis of *Remembering Freedom History Harvest*, a digital archive that "relies...on the community archives and memory work that join together in descendant archival practice as a way to generate Black women's histories". Finally, Ravynn K Stringfield examines the labors of joy for Black women graduate students sharing their experiences online, which include her own labors on her blog *Black Girl Does Grad School (BGDGS)*; she reminds us that there are communities and networks that will never fail us, even in the face of abject political adversity.

19

The contributors also analyze the approaches of Black people and communities in digital spaces in innovative ways. For instance, Brienne Adams analyzes intimacy in affirmative transformative fan practices in the the *Awkward Black Girl* and *Insecure* Black digital fandoms. Bryan Jenkins and Taryn Myers conduct a rich qualitative coding analysis of Black podcasts, centering their analysis on how these podcasts integrate and build community, resistance, and voice. Finally, Romi Ron Morrison's "Voluptuous Disintergration" helps us better understand Black life and its relationship to technology and revolutionary politics. Their theorization of Black Computational Thought highlights the "quotidian, social, opaque, woven, and fugitive practices of computation born from Black diasporic movement", giving us further insight into how Black people have always already been on the cutting edge of both technology and culture.

20

Metareflections

Across the meta-reflections we hope you notice the incredible strides the field has made, and can see more plainly the ways in which these scholars have made and influenced the field. But we also want to note how they are not just brilliant scholars that have created works that are thoroughly cited throughout, they are have also acted as mentors, as interlocutors, and as champions of this rising generation — proving that they are not just brilliant, but that they are nurturing and supportive and that they believe in this generation, a generosity that is unparalleled. As you read them, we hope that it inspires you to return to and take a deeper look into their work, as that will bring further clarity of purpose as you dive into the work of this rising generation that builds from them.

21

Moya Bailey reflects on her journey as a central Black DH scholar and looks forward; she reflects on how Black DH and other online spaces can provide ample opportunity for connection and research towards social justice, but expresses concern with DH's continued obsession with coding. Still, she finds hope in the expanding diversity — both identity and theoretical diversity — of the field. Like Bailey, Roopika Risam reflects on her early years in DH, which led her and like-minded colleagues to create coalitions to build a more justice-centered and ethnicity-focused DH. She had not initially set out to do DH work, but like many of us, she found that DH was a place that was ripe for exploring new possibilities, possibilities that offered even more opportunities to work towards social justice than more traditional frameworks and methods of study.

22

Angel David Nieves gives practical advice on how we can work towards expanding the diversity of the field. He offers

23

ten specific practices that can do just that. They include “harness[ing] the breadth of digital expertise, in Black social media, and Black software and hardware design while developing new forms of digital scholarship” and supporting information systems practitioners who are advancing Black DH projects. From an information systems practitioner perspective, Bethany Nowvskie argues for the need to create archives, collections and libraries that center generative and healing infrastructure, rather than control. Elizabeth Losh focuses on concerns about funding, labor, and equity, and encourages more localized organizing to better support Black DH, Black graduate students, and graduate students of color; she points to the *Intentionally Digital, Intentionally Black* conference as an example. These scholars point us towards concrete ways that we can assure that the field of Black DH, and even DH more broadly, has better practices and more inclusive ways of organizing within the field. In Kim Gallon’s metareflection, she urges us to not just look to Black DH as a site of resistance and liberation, but to also look at the places where the joy and pleasure of Black life can be found. We see Gallon’s call as necessary. It is this hope and joy that sustains the optimism we run on to drive the future in a better direction. We hope that you find moments of pleasure tucked all throughout this issue, and we hope that they nourish you.

The other metareflection writers look back to their own theoretical groundwork in DH, and their own impetus for driving the field. Kaiama L. Glover remarks on how DH has the ability to provide new space and platforms for all sorts of thinking and projects. Like many, she believes in the “affordances of the digital” for collaboration and work towards equity. But, in order to do this, she urges us to avoid replicating the practice of focusing solely on the US, and push the boundaries further to be more inclusive of all Black people, and create more space and opportunity for research by and about people from Caribbean and Black people across the global diaspora. Avoiding a focus solely on the US helps us move away from overdetermining American subjects and overlooking others. This resonates with Louis Maraj’s plea that we avoid canonizing or constricting Black DH with too much definition. Instead, we should focus on the multiplicity of Black DH and Black lives. He notes “Nah, I believe that virality inherently offers — through distribution — constant space for mashing up contexts, artifacts, identities, and the very frameworks on which settler-colonial, racial capitalist projects lie”. As Maraj argues – and as all the metareflection authors demonstrate – Black Digital Humanities scholars, practices, and theories resist full and complete definitions.

24

Conclusion

We hope Black DH continues to evade definition. Practically, it calls in all types of folks who do all types of work, whether the emphasis lies in the digital or in the humanities. It also allows scholars to create an individual sense of the field to fit their own needs. More than thirty years into its earliest conceptions of the field, in 2014 the website “What is Digital Humanities” randomized more than 800 DH scholar’s running definitions of the field showing the wide breadth of definitions.

25

The focus of Black DH and this special issue is not to define Black DH, but rather spotlight the limitless, interdisciplinary nature of Black DH and Black scholarship. Both article and metareflection authors alike build upon lineages of Black studies, feminist, queer, and womanist scholars, forging new paths using their innovative methodologies as they examine, construct, and reimagine innovative communities and people. We hope this special issue contributes to the expanding field as well as Black DH scholars, DH scholars, and graduate students committed to Black studies and centering Black lives to take up this work.

26

Works Cited

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