

Debates in #BlackDH: Key Moments and Queer Directions in Black Studies Scholarship

Faith J. Day

Abstract

Historically, the study of the digital has been an amorphous undertaking, spanning multiple fields and disciplines and positioning the digital as a democratic space open to multiple communities and perspectives. Despite this ideology, scholarship, including research on #transformDH to #BlackDH, has demonstrated the need for greater diversity, equity, and inclusion within the digital humanities. Specifically, these hashtags have been used to curate diverse scholarship while demonstrating the need to create a scholarship that focuses on an intersectional understanding of the digital humanities. By drawing on the histories of research and researchers both within and outside of Black studies, this article will illuminate the means and methods of producing scholarship at this critical intersection while speaking to the need for greater inclusion of Black feminist, queer, and justice-oriented perspectives.

Pushing back against the impetus to add identity to the title of a field or framework in name but not practice, this article refines the histories and contributions of multiple disciplines and standpoints that should be included and credited when defining the “Black” in Black digital humanities. Whether sparking hashtag activism and crowdsourcing digital labor to developing new terminology and fields, Black digital humanities draws on and develops work that is already critically engaged with the intersection of identity and digital studies in theory and praxis. By focusing on the development of the Black digital humanities and its defining characteristics, this article will also articulate how the nexus of digital research, activism, and pedagogy offers key interventions and new directions for both Black studies and the digital humanities.

We are in a critical discursive moment where we can debate the origin story and definition of the Black digital humanities. For scholars who write at the intersection of identity and the internet, the 21st century has presented several opportunities for critical reflection and debates on the role of race in digital scholarship. One such reflection is the introduction to the 2022 *Social Media and Society* special issue titled “Interrogating Digital Blackness” by Meredith Clark and Adam Banks. Drawing on Stuart Hall’s essay “What is this Black in Black Popular Culture”, Clark and Banks provide an overview of the many scholars, fields, and theoretical frameworks that have offered critical perspectives on the role of Black culture and community within the creation of digital content and platforms [Clark and Banks 2022, 1].

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While many academic disciplines are studying this shift towards the web and virtual environments, the digital humanities are especially well-suited to analyze the impact of technology on culture and communities. In particular, the Black digital humanities combines multiple disciplines, theoretical perspectives, and research methods to analyze the many past, present, and future instances when technology has influenced Black culture. Whether through sparking hashtag activism and crowdsourcing digital labor or developing new theories and terminology, Black digital humanities draws on and develops work critically engaged with the intersection of identity and digital studies.

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Therefore, this article starts by defining digital humanities and my introduction to the field by discussing its critical moments, characteristics, and debates, from its origins in the humanities to its shift towards quantitative methods and the effort to #transformDH. Using the research and researchers in Black studies as a reference point, I explore the definition of Black digital humanities by highlighting professors and programs that produce critical scholarship and speculative thinking at the intersection of Black studies and digital humanities. To conclude, I call for more projects and

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research that acknowledge the role of queer and trans members of the community in discussions of digital culture. Throughout this article, I also cite several examples of digital humanities scholarship and projects to demonstrate a Black queer and femme approach to reading the field and to show how #transformDH and #BlackDH have evolved and developed through multiple versions of the field and debates in the digital humanities.

Debating the “Digital” in Digital Humanities

Before defining “Black” in the Black digital humanities, it is essential to think critically about debates that define the “digital” in the digital humanities, which preface the critical transformation of the field. Historically, the study of the digital has been an amorphous undertaking, spanning multiple fields and disciplines and positioning the digital as a democratic space open to multiple communities and perspectives. Consequently, early digital humanities research focused on the potential that comes with new and emerging technology. For example, Matthew Kirschenbaum’s article “What is Digital Humanities and What is it Doing in English Departments?” aims to define the digital humanities and explain how computing is used in disciplines like English. He cites several conferences, organizations, departments, and articles to demonstrate the challenge of defining the digital humanities due to its diverse fields and perspectives [Kirschenbaum 2016, 1–4]. However, he notes that the field’s defining or unifying characteristic is bringing people together by investing in the public humanities, digital pedagogy, social media, and collaborative work.

Speaking to the project-based nature of the field, Kirschenbaum ends the piece with the assertion that:

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. Isn’t that something you want in your English department? [Kirschenbaum 2016, 6]

Kirschenbaum proffers the importance of production and education by focusing on “scholarship and pedagogy” as integral components of the digital humanities. Moreover, it is in this final assertion that Kirschenbaum captures how many digital humanists were introduced to the field and how that introduction influences how we came to define it. At the same time that Kirschenbaum was writing about the role of digital humanities in English departments, I found digital humanities through a college English department. While taking an introductory English course, my knowledge of digital humanities was encompassed by the book *The New Media Reader* and my writing as a Humanities, Arts, Science, and Technology Advanced Collaboratory (HASTAC) scholar.

Therefore, my perspective of the digital humanities focused on the role the field could play within libraries and museums, as many digital humanities projects invested in digitizing historical records, developing interactive art and media, and analyzing large datasets of literary texts. In this sense, the “digital” in digital humanities encompassed the many ways digital tools and technologies changed humanistic traditions. However, even as my research interests focused on the impact of technology on society, this English-based approach to digital humanities centered less on lived experience and embodiment and more on linguistic and philosophical play with born-digital texts. Consequently, I developed the belief that Black identity and technology were separate studies, and it was not until the publication of the anthology *Race After the Internet* that I began to contemplate the relationship between race and digital media.

This background and introduction also meant that my definition of digital humanities was primarily theoretical and creative. Unlike the methodological understanding of digital humanities that would later unite scholars in the field, I defined the digital humanities as a systematic view or standpoint rather than as a methodological toolkit. Like many scholars in English DH, I saw digital humanities (and being a digital humanist) as taking the perspective that computers and technology could empower people to make critical changes in society or on a smaller scale in their respective fields and disciplines. However, more than a decade later, the way we think about the digital humanities has shifted from theorizing about the power of computers and technology towards a more tangible investment in skills-building. From library and data carpentry to The Humanities and Technology (THAT) Camp, training in digital humanities focuses less on philosophical discussions of the role of computing within media, culture, and society and more on understanding

technical language and quantitative methods.

In many ways, the term “digital humanist” has aligned the digital humanities as a practice with distinct practitioners who possess specific skills. These skills usually include coding and data visualization but rarely focus on humanities theory. Therefore, the field produces “DH practitioners” who are united in their knowledge of what they can do without a shared epistemology that unites the field around what practitioners think or believe. Although digital humanities is still prevalent in English departments, the focus on methods has shifted, so what was once viewed as the digitization of the humanities is now quite similar to the humanization of the sciences. For example, the recent calls for more ethical artificial intelligence or responsible machine learning echo the concerns digital humanists have always raised, as they focus on the issues and inequalities that can arise from technology adoption and its influence on society. However, these calls also focus on quantitative big data methods, prioritizing the study of algorithms over art and culture.

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Numerous digital humanists have engaged in methodological critique in response to this practical turn. In 2012, Kirschenbaum's essay was republished as a chapter in the first edition of *Debates in the Digital Humanities*. This anthology included multiple foundational texts that defined the field and its methods. It also included a section that focused on critiques of the field. A chapter by Tara McPherson titled “Why are the Digital Humanities so White? Or Thinking the Histories of Race and Computation” anticipated concerns about the oppressive algorithmic systems that undergird technology and the role these systems play within our society and academic silos [McPherson 2012, 139–142]. McPherson's essay also questioned why studying digital tools and technologies had taken over human-centered inquiry.

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Although the digital realm was a place of anonymity and liberation from the social hierarchies and oppressive structures of the physical world, it has become evident that the digital realm has not generated an entirely new and independent world free from societal ills. Instead, it has replicated the offline world's issues within the digital domain. As a reflection of its subject of study, the digital humanities has struggled to address the relationship between identity and inequality in favor of a color-blind approach that privileges the examination of tools and methods. Even after over a decade, these concerns are still significant for digital humanities practitioners, leading to demands for change and transformation in the sector regarding social justice issues and the study of race.

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Black and Brave: On #transformDH and the Era of Critique

Debates in the Digital Humanities was not the only publication where critiques of the digital humanities and the presence of oppressive systems within the field remained an important topic and point of contention. Specifically, movements such as #transformDH played a critical role in the recognition of Black digital humanities scholarship, marking a significant moment in the history of the digital humanities.

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In the essay “The Brave Side of Digital Humanities”, Fiona Barnett discusses in-person and online responses to conference panels that question the nature of digital humanities work. Barnett's essay also highlights several unspoken codes and patterns that influence what and who is considered a part of digital humanities scholarship [Barnett 2014, 67–69]. Barnett argues that this differentiation between what is included and what is excluded in the digital humanities can be expressed through “the conflict between hack versus yack” or making versus theorizing [Barnett 2014, 74]. While digital humanities projects showcasing technical skills are well-received in DH spaces, the same acceptance is not given to more critical work. As a result, there is an over-representation of digital humanities projects and practitioners that do not critically engage with social issues, such as the digital divide or online identity performance. Referencing the work of #transformDH, Barnett cites scholars such as Moya Bailey, Amanda Phillips, and Alexis Lothian, who have amplified their critiques of digital humanities scholarship through various forms of digital activism.

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In the book *#HashtagActivism: Networks of Race and Gender Justice*, hashtag activism is defined as “the creation and proliferation of online activism stamped with a hashtag” [Jackson, Bailey, and Welles 2020, xxxiii]. Digital or hashtag activism is often used to raise awareness and mobilize large groups around a cause. In their essay titled “Can Digital Humanities Mean Transformative Critique?”, Alexis Lothian and Amanda Phillips reflect on the significant contribution of hashtag activism in the development of digital humanities. In the essay, the authors state:

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“#TransformDH was our attempt to turn the digital humanities . . . toward the bodies of critical work in new media studies by Wendy Chun, Lisa Nakamura, Anna Everett, Tara McPherson, and many others, that unpack the politics inherent in the force of the digital, the powers that shape the hardware and software that in turn shape our scholarly work. [Lothian and Phillips 2013, 3]

The hashtag #transformDH has highlighted the importance of activism and diversity, equity, and inclusion in the field of digital humanities. This movement has shifted the focus from solely methodological and project-based research to theoretical and community-focused research. As a result, digital and physical spaces have been created to host these critical conversations. Moreover, the hashtag has been used to showcase diverse scholarship on various digital platforms, emphasizing the need for an intersectional understanding of the digital humanities.

This intersectional critique of project-based digital humanities work is also explored by Moya Bailey in the essay “All the Digital Humanists Are White, All the Nerds Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave”. In this essay, Bailey responds to the lack of diversity in the field by stating:

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The way in which identities both inform theory and practice in digital humanities have been largely overlooked [and] . . . The move from “margin to centre” offers the opportunity to engage new sets of theoretical questions that expose implicit assumptions about what and who counts in digital humanities. [Bailey 2011, 1]

By investigating an otherwise “unexamined identity politics of whiteness, masculinity, and able-bodiedness”, Bailey shows how the digital humanities replicate many of the same exclusionary hierarchies as other fields and systems [Bailey 2011, 1]. Bailey further suggests that numerous people can be classified as digital humanities practitioners, though their work frequently goes acknowledged within the field. This is because being situated on the fringe of digital humanities work results in less recognition, as does scholarship that does not conform to the traditional digital humanities model. However, Bailey points out that we can make more room for scholarship engaged with identity and digital humanities by looking at the places “where people of color, women, [and] people with disabilities are already engaged in digital projects” [Bailey 2011, 2].

While these essays reflect on #transformDH, their recommendations can also be applied to the Black digital humanities or #BlackDH. They suggest that Black digital humanities scholarship has always been a part of the digital humanities, even when it was not well-received or clearly understood [Barnett 2014, 70–73]. However, it was only when more open conversations about intersectionality and inclusion took place that the field began to take visible form. While understanding digital methods is an integral part of the digital humanities, it is crucial to acknowledge that some implicit theoretical beliefs and biases undergird that praxis. Therefore, digital humanities scholars who engage in critical theories of race, gender, sexuality, and many other categories do the work of exploring the importance of developing both theory and praxis.

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Movements like #transformDH and #BlackDH highlight the investment in critical digital humanities that worked to locate the digital humanities in fields, disciplines, and institutions that are only sometimes included in the representation and reception of digital humanities work. Consequently, hashtags can also be used to find Black digital humanities projects and practitioners in DH. As a tagging system for scholars within the field, hashtag #BlackDH signal boosts Black digital humanities scholarship online and offline, from live-tweeting at conferences to sharing calls for papers and new projects. Using hashtags and other linking methods is essential in Black digital humanities work because it covers many fields and frameworks that could be included within #BlackDH. Just as scholars within #transformDH have included scholars from communication and new media studies, #BlackDH also includes scholars from fields like Black studies, history, and sociology.

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Building on the success of #transformDH and the hashtag activism seen within academic Twitter, hashtags like #BlackDH bring visibility to work that is not commonly represented as part of the digital humanities. For example, when I utilize #BlackDH on platforms like X (formerly Twitter), I can find books like *Alternative Historiographies of the Digital Humanities*, edited by Dorothy Kim and Adeline Koh, which explore the many identities and perspectives that we do not find when telling the story of the digital humanities. Additionally, this hashtag includes references to numerous projects

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and podcasts and offers recaps and highlights from talks between scholars in the field. The next section of this article therefore focuses on how #BlackDH defines itself through critical essays and a diverse community of digital scholars, the very work we can uncover through hashtag activism.

By Another Name: Defining and Tracing the Black Digital Humanities

Drawing on Fiona Barnett's (2014) essay, I use this section to recognize and connect the linkages between several fields of study and perspectives that should be defined as Black digital humanities, as well as the new directions that could be sparked moving forward [Barnett 2014, 76]. To define Black digital humanities, we must examine two scholarly works that have played a crucial role in unifying the field and articulating the research and contributions of Black diasporic people in digital humanities. These works are Kim Gallon's "Making a Case for the Black Digital Humanities" and Safiya Noble's "Toward a Critical Black Digital Humanities". These essays provide a framework for scholars to ask relevant questions, identify key areas of research and discussion, and locate relevant literature.

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Building on the work of #transformDH, Professor Kim Gallon argues in her essay "Making a Case for the Black Digital Humanities" that the Black digital humanities can help reveal the racialized power systems underlying the digital humanities field and its associated techniques. Gallon believes the Black digital humanities is valuable due to its standpoint, theories, and methodology. Specifically, Gallon notes that the work of the Black digital humanities is based on a "technology of recovery" that uses digital tools and technology to humanize Black diasporic people and recover the artifacts of Black culture [Gallon 2016, 44].

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This perspective of Black digital humanities is consistent with the goals of #transformDH and the critical shift in the digital humanities, as it urges scholars to analyze not only the racialized frameworks that support technology but also how the technology of race penetrates every aspect of society, including academic research. By resisting the hidden racism, or what Tara McPherson describes as the "lenticular logic" that is the basis of most systems, this essay presents the Black digital humanities as a means of restoring the humanistic perspective of the digital humanities by leveraging the unique viewpoint of Black community members [McPherson 2013, 25].

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Safiya Noble's essay also discusses the role of Black digital humanities within and outside academia. In the essay, Noble draws from Kim Gallon and Roopika Risam's essays in *Debates in the Digital Humanities* and incorporates Black feminist theories and Black studies scholarship. Specifically, Noble writes that "Black studies has a unique role to play in dismembering how we think about humanity and the digital humanities by extension". Thus, developing a "black epistemology will generate questions about the relationship between the racialization of humanity and the digital as power, ultimately fostering new inquiries and deeper understandings about the human condition" [Noble 2019]. The essay then critiques the institutional structures that support digital humanities research within the academy while lacking community engagement and social impact outside of it.

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Similar to the work of #transformDH and #BlackDH, Noble calls for "DH scholars to engage in the work of African/Black diaspora studies" and for "African/Black diaspora studies scholars who do not necessarily align themselves with the digital humanities to contribute to the project of surfacing the intellectual traditions of political economy and race and gender studies in the field" [Noble 2019, 32]. In doing so, Noble signals the need for research within the digital humanities that is attentive to issues such as environmental justice and workers' rights, which requires working with communities and organizations outside of higher education.

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Overall, these two essays show how the definition of the Black digital humanities has evolved from interventions made in digital humanities research to incorporate the field of Black studies and other disciplines that take a sociocultural perspective on the world. Specifically, Gallon's essay offers a theoretical perspective on the role of Black studies in digital humanities and technology studies. On the other hand, Noble's essay highlights the structural issues that need to be addressed in the digital humanities and the type of work that needs to be done within the academy and society. Nevertheless, both essays demonstrate how the term "Black Digital humanities" can bring together multiple schools of research and scholarship at the intersection of Black studies and digital studies or ethnic studies and digital humanities.

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However, as Moya Bailey writes, there is a need to challenge the "add and stir model of diversity" [Bailey 2011, 3]. In

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other words, creating space for the Black digital humanities requires more than simply adding Black (i.e., Black studies or scholars) to the digital humanities, which in turn requires us to acknowledge and resist the trend of “black-washing” academic fields. “Black-washing” refers to the superficial use of Black content or related hashtags to signal racial solidarity without actually engaging in anti-racism work. For example, during Black History Month, platforms like YouTube and Netflix create algorithms to recommend Black content to users without addressing how the platform can be complicit in its own racial biases. We must recognize and push back against “black-washing” in order to truly advance Black digital humanities.

So the question becomes: What actual work is being produced within the field or discipline to ensure racial justice and equity outside of profiting from hashtag activism and the current sociopolitical moment? For many Black digital humanists, this means doing research that is participatory and attentive to data and design justice issues, as well as the concerns that disproportionately affect Black communities, such as climate change and healthcare equity. Additionally, there is a need for a recuperative recognition of the research and scholarship produced within Black studies that should fall under the auspices of the digital humanities.

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For example, several scholars have established institutional spaces at the intersection of Black studies, science and technology Studies (STS), and digital humanities, like Ruha Benjamin's work with the Ida B. Wells Just Data Lab, Marc Anthony Neal's efforts with Left of Black, the Center for Black Digital Research (#DigBlk) at Penn State, the Center for Africana Futures at Texas Southern University, and African American History, Culture and Digital Humanities (AADHum) at the University of Maryland. These institutional spaces each work to forward Black digital humanities research, events, and resources that interact with the public and mobilize the #BlackDH hashtag to build a collaborative network both on and offline.

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Additionally, organizations like Data for Black Lives, a group of activists, organizers, and mathematicians, are committed to using data science and technology to create concrete and measurable change in the lives of Black people. This collective hosts conferences around many of the questions that scholars and activists are asking about the relationship between politics and platforms, which I believe is essential to many of the goals of the Black digital humanities framework.

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Moving forward, it is crucial to not only trace the lineage of Black digital humanities through the calls for more diverse work within the digital humanities but also to invest in studying the technological advancements of the future that continue to motivate scholars and activists within Black studies. Therefore, the following sections outline moments in the past, present, and future of Black studies research that are important to developing Black digital humanities research while pointing out where and how the field can and could become more inclusive of Black queer and trans histories and narratives.

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On the Past: Afrofuturism, Scholar-Activism, and the History of Black Studies

Looking to the past, one of the critical areas of study that Black digital humanities scholars bring to the digital humanities is a historicization of technology through the legacy of Black scholarship and activism. From projects focused on digitizing Black History to efforts to recognize the speculative design capabilities of historic Black scholarship, recovering the theory and praxis that motivated abolitionists and academics to imagine a future filled with equity and empowerment is one of the most significant contributions Black studies brings to the digital humanities. As Jessica Marie Johnson writes in her essay “Markup BodiesBlack [Life] Studies and Slavery [Death] Studies at the Digital Crossroads”:

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Black digital practice . . . predates digital intervention, drawing on strategies of empowerment, joy, and kinship created out of Black freedom struggles to facilitate the use of digital tools and create new methodologies, practices, and even ethics for their use. [Johnson 2018, 68]

Instead of positioning Black history as solely in the past and digital practice as present- or future-focused, Johnson complicates our understanding of time and the digital by stating that a “Black digital practice” could exist well before

“digital intervention” [Johnson 2018].

Understanding time and technology within the context of Black culture is also a key component in exploring the concept of Afrofuturism and its role in the history of Black studies and Black digital humanities projects. In *#identity: Hashtagging Race, Gender, Sexuality, and Nation*, Grace Gipson cites Yotasha Womack in defining Afrofuturism as “an intersection of imagination, technology, the future, and liberation” [Gipson 2019, 84]. After completing a hashtag analysis of “#Afrofuturism”, Gipson finds that most tweets on the topic depict Afrofuturism as “an artistic aesthetic, as a tool for critical cultural analysis, as a platform for analyzing the impact of modernization on cultural production, and as an exploration of Black identity” [Gipson 2019, 88–89]. Therefore, the description of Afrofuturism overlaps with definitions of the Black digital humanities because Afrofuturism and the Black digital humanities are each committed to humanizing Black communities and investigating the socio-cultural dimensions of culture and technology.

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In addition, Gipson utilizes the concept of Afrofuturism to discuss “flame-keeping”, or “acts of preserving cultural productions and a body of knowledge” [Gipson 2019, 86]. This method of passing on knowledge is usually seen within historical texts but also in the creation of speculative fiction. Flame-keeping allows Black creatives to share their beliefs about the future, passing on their hopes and dreams for their community to generations that will be more capable or better positioned to accomplish them. Through examples from individuals such as Sojourner Truth and Fannie Lou Hamer, Gipson demonstrates how historical figures and texts envisioned Black futures by passing on the flame of knowledge and intuition. In doing so, Gipson suggests that we should view historical figures and activists of abolition and civil rights movements as Afrofuturists in their own right.

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From this standpoint, there are several moments in Black history where activists and scholars engaged in Afrofuturistic thought. As Walidah Imarisha writes in the introduction to the book *Octavia’s Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements*, “Whenever we try to envision a world without war, without violence, without prisons, without capitalism, we are engaging in speculative fiction” [Imarisha 2015, 3]. Black activists and scholars can be viewed as the prophets and dreamers who imagined futures where Black people were free citizens — which contextualizes why Gallon’s definition of the Black digital humanities positions the field as a humanizing project. Flame-keeping is something that activists and Black scholars still do when they imagine and write what Robin Kelley calls “freedom dreams” for this current moment and the future [Kelley 2022].

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Kara Keeling’s book *Queer Times, Black Futures* further explores the concepts of flame-keeping and freedom dreams by analyzing how speculative imagining has been crucial for Black queer scholars, activists, and creatives. Keeling advances Kelley’s concept of freedom dreams by writing that a “Black radical imagination recombines the contents of the long arc of Black existence in ways that call forth new relations to all” [Keeling 2019, 32–35]. From this perspective, projects that recognize Black queer and trans people in historical records and archives are one example of how radical imagination can shift how we view the lineage of Black existence. Consequently, many galleries, libraries, archives, and museums (GLAMs) utilize speculative imagining to create more inclusive Black digital humanities projects. For example, the National Museum of African-American History and Culture (NMAAC) has developed an in-person and online exhibit focusing on Black LGBTQ+ history during the Harlem Renaissance. Although some artists and creatives openly identified as part of the LGBTQ+ community, archivists and historians have had to speculate about the identity of others [Day 2023]. In this sense, Afrofuturist practices like speculative imagining can be used to digitally reconstruct histories that are more inclusive of Black queer and trans community members.

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I also saw the potential of radical imagination when writing about my first Black digital studies conference, Black Thought 2.0. In an interview for the 2012 conference at Duke University, Mark Anthony Neal is quoted as saying:

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Given our rich tradition of public intellectuals, dating back to figures like [Frederick] Douglass and Sojourner Truth, it just seems as though new media represents another way for black intellectuals to be in the world. Imagine what W.E.B. [Du Bois] might have done with a Twitter feed? [Duke Today Staff 2012]

By imagining W.E.B. Du Bois as a Twitter user, Mark Anthony Neal uses speculative thought to demonstrate how Black intellectuals were invested in sharing information with public audiences through the latest technologies even before the

development of the Black digital humanities. In the book *W.E.B. Du Bois' Data Portraits*, Whitney Battle Baptiste and Britt Rusert also write about Du Bois' interest in innovation by describing the infographics created for his sociological work in Atlanta during the 1900 Paris Exhibition. Specifically, the authors write, "The infographics look back to a history of data visualization in the 19th century deeply connected to the institution of slavery, and the struggle against it, while looking forward" [Battle-Baptiste and Rusert 2018, 98].

Du Bois' visualizations are incredibly precise, even for a 21st-century audience. Although the visualizations are hand-drawn, they are vibrant and colorful, reminiscent of 21st-century digital projects like Giorgia Lupi and Stefanie Posavec's "Dear Data" visualizations or other forms of data storytelling [Lupi and Posavec]. Therefore, the visualizations anticipated what data and design would look like. Furthermore, they serve as an example of a Black digital practice that existed before the digital era. Du Bois' interest in speculative fiction is also noteworthy, as it allows him to effectively use information from the past and present to envision future possibilities in his research [Battle-Baptiste and Rusert 2018, 6].

This looking back and looking forward is also described as a method of framing that Du Bois used in the publication of his scholarship, "[which] presents us with a stunning juxtaposition that points neither to historical progress nor to the overcoming of the slave past but to the ways, slavery continued quite literally to frame the present" [Battle-Baptiste and Rusert 2018, 18]. As a result, Du Bois' work can be seen as a precursor, or the academic ancestor, to the type of work we now see in the Black digital humanities. We can follow Du Bois' example by working to uncover the many ways in which the legacy of slavery continues to frame our understanding of data, science, and technology in the 20th and 21st centuries.

Furthermore, as Black scholars work to contextualize the history of slavery within the study of technology, they can also use this understanding of the past to create a progressive account of the present and future. In the essay *Say It Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud: African Americans, American Artifactual Culture, and Black Vernacular Technological Creativity*, Rayvon Fouché cites the work of Anthony Walton to describe how part of the legacy of slavery is that technology and technological systems have historically been used to oppress Black diasporic people [Fouché 2006, 639–640]. Even after slavery, even in moments of social progress or technological advancement, any historical moment in which Black people are framed as data points or as cogs in a machine rather than as individuals is evidence of history repeating itself.

However, Fouché moves past this understanding of digital technology as a means of oppression by asserting that always "thinking about the technological control of African Americans . . . strips black people of technological agency" [Fouché 2006, 640]. It is essential to acknowledge that Black people have utilized technology to their advantage in various moments throughout history. Although society often considers science and technology as relatively new fields of study, Black digital humanists acknowledge that this work has existed for a long time. They aim to enhance the narrative of Black communities beyond deficit narratives because highlighting instances of empowerment, creativity, and community involvement is as important as addressing histories of oppression.

Fouché uses the term "Black vernacular technological creativity" to demonstrate that Black history and culture "is rich in historical value and replete with rebellion, resistance, assimilation, and appropriation in forms we would often not recognize, and in places, we are not accustomed to looking" [Fouché 2006, 640]. In this sense, Fouché's work acts as another critical precursor to the Black digital humanities in American Culture, as the study of Black culture and communities allows scholars to expand on the past and bring light to the ingenuity of Black digital practices across multiple moments in time and in places where we do not usually search for digital scholarship.

Numerous Black Digital Humanities projects and practitioners exist in alternative academic spaces like libraries and public-facing scholarship. While most academic research is available only to those who have access to institutional repositories and academic journals, public projects within alternative academic spaces use the digital realm to ensure that projects are openly accessible to audiences within and outside of academia. For instance, the Council of Library and Information Resources (CLIR) *Curated Futures Project* utilizes the theme of Afrofuturism to compile Black Digital Humanities projects from across libraries and institutions [Smith and Clark 2023]. Another project, the *Kansas City Defender's* "{B/qKC}: a digital archive" reimagines the Kansas City community by writing Black queer and trans people

and places back into the city's history [Montalvo 2023]. Each of these projects reflects the creative possibilities of the Black digital humanities and the importance of producing community-engaged work.

In the Present: The “Black Studies” in Black Digital Humanities

Moving from the past to the present moment, there are several fields and disciplines from which scholars invested in the Black digital humanities can draw and build. As Safiya Noble writes in *Debates in Digital Humanities*, “We need to continue to inquire with a critical DH lens tilted toward Black studies, gender studies, ethnic studies, information studies, media studies, communication, sociology, and science and technology studies” [Noble 2019, 33]. While each of these areas is important, we must also recognize that the inherent interdisciplinarity of Black studies means that many of these areas are also practiced by scholars within the discipline.

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Throughout the history of Black studies, multiple calls for interventions and new scholarship have demonstrated the discipline's importance within other fields. Although Black studies continues to be positioned as a discipline that prioritizes studying communities and culture without acknowledgement of what the discipline brings to science and technology, there have been several moments where the study of digital tools and technology has gained traction within Black studies and laid the foundation for Black digital humanities.

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Therefore, I use this section to outline further the many nodes and edges that make up the Black digital humanities scholarship network by pointing out the moments when the digital converges with Black studies. While this section is not exhaustive, it demonstrates Black studies' role in developing Black digital humanities. It also offers some key examples of where scholars can find Black digital humanities work relevant to the present moment. As Kim Gallon writes, “e-Black studies, black code studies, and digital blackness” are all examples of conferences and curations where we can see the overlap between the digital humanities and Black studies [Gallon 2016, 47].

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Beginning with e-Black studies, Abdul Alkalimat and Ronald Bailey's essay “From Black to eBlack” maps the history of Black studies and how that history positions Black studies as a movement, profession, and network committed to social change and institutional transformation [Alkalimat and Bailey 2012, 10–11]. This work is continued in *The Digital Black Atlantic*, an edited collection from 2021 that offers one of the most comprehensive considerations of the intersection of Black studies and the digital humanities. Alkalimat's more recent essay, “The Sankofa Principle: From the Drum to the Digital” further reflects on the principles underpinning e-Black studies, including cyberdemocracy, collective intelligence, and information freedom. Cyberdemocracy seeks to overcome the digital divide, while collective intelligence involves collecting, analyzing, and utilizing intellectual thought. Information freedom, on the other hand, advocates for unrestricted access to information [Alkalimat 2021, 8]. These theoretical principles are also paired with methods that help scholars put e-Black studies into practice. For example, Alkalimat traces the development of e-Black studies from primarily in-person activities, like conferences and courses, to open-access online spaces, including digital projects and virtual communities [Alkalimat 2021, 12–16].

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Building on e-Black studies, there has been a surge in researchers, departments, and organizations that have taken up this call to consider Black diasporic communities' role in studying information, data, and digital technologies. For example, the present moment has ushered in several conferences and curations that were explicit in their analysis of the overlap between Black studies and digital humanities. In contrast to most digital humanities conferences, the Black digital humanities tend to exist within conferences that center on the unique challenges of being Black online and researching Black communities during the era of digital media and technology. As I noted in an earlier section of this essay, some notable conferences in the development of the field were Duke University's Black Thought 2.0 in 2012, followed by Rutgers's Digital Blackness Conference in 2016, the University of Maryland's 2018 conference titled “Intentionally Digital, Intentionally Black”, and the 2022 “Present Encounters: Digital Humanities Meet Afrofuturism” symposium hosted by Temple University Libraries. These conferences were bolstered by digital curations of projects and essays that also spoke to this unique intersection, as well as the creation of virtual spaces where scholars could converse about this work.

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In addition to e-Black studies, digital Blackness, and the *Digital Black Atlantic*, it is essential to note scholars that incorporate the literal and metaphorical study of code in their work. For example, early Black studies and digital

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humanities scholarship converged in 2017 when *The Black Scholar* published a collection of essays on Black code studies. In the introduction to the collection, “Black code studies” is defined as “queer, femme, fugitive, and radical” [Johnson and Neal 2017, 1]. Therefore, this collection included essays that addressed the need for work that is queer, feminist, activist, and abolitionist within the digital humanities and Black studies. This wording frames Black code studies as an essential moment in Black studies and Digital Humanities by breaking out of the institutional structures of project-based digital humanities work and traditional academic inquiry.

Similarly, in the essay “Catching our breath: Critical Race STS and the Carceral Imagination”, Ruja Benjamin utilizes critical race theory and abolitionist ethics to intervene in science and technology studies. Hence, critical race science and technology studies (critical race STS) is closely related to Black code studies and Black digital humanities due to its investment in radical work that speaks truth to power by openly speaking out against social injustice (e.g., gender inequity, police brutality, environmental inequality, disability, and health disparity), as well as demonstrating the importance of intersectional analysis in the study of science and technology [Benjamin 2016, 151].

This investment in scholarship focused on intersectionality is also seen in the number of publications on the intersections of Black feminism and digital studies. Over the years, these publications have focused on the potential of the internet as a space for activism, community building, and fieldwork. Beginning with Anna Everett's (2004) “On Cyberfeminism and Cyberwomanism”, which combines Black feminism and womanism with feminist science and technology studies. Specifically, Everett writes about how Black women use digital tools and technology for community engagement, organizing, and activism [Everett 2004, 1281–1283]. In contrast, scholars like Tressie McMillan Cottom utilize the terminology of Black cyberfeminism as an intervention in the subfield of “digital sociology” [McMillan Cottom 2016]. Kishonna Gray also employs the terminology of Black cyberfeminism to study identity performance within video games and virtual communities [Gray 2018, 285–286]. Most recently, Catherine Knight Steele's book titled *Digital Black Feminism* encapsulates this history by demonstrating the importance of centering Black voices in the study of the digital realm and, specifically, centering the lived experience and digital praxis of Black women and femmes [Steele 2021, 13–15]. However, even as we see more inclusion of Black feminist scholarship in the digital humanities, a few areas remain where the Black digital humanities could be expanded.

To the Future: Building Black Queer and Femme Digital Praxis

In their essay titled “Black Digital Humanities for the Rising Generation”, Alanna Prince and Cara Marta Messina argue that the field's radical politics of inclusivity are fundamental and that citational practices are crucial [Prince and Messina 2022, 1–2]. In my work, this means citing scholars like Kara Keeling and Shaka McGlotten, who engage in queer politics when writing about digital platforms, performance, and political activism. Scholars in Black queer studies have produced a range of materials, including books, essays, and artwork, that explore the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality. By citing more of this work, we can develop the lineage of Black cyberfeminism toward the digital praxis of Black queer and femme communities.

Specifically, Kara Keeling's article “Queer OS” draws on the same lineage of new media scholars that launched #transformDH and the critical turn in digital humanities. For Keeling, queer OS disrupts traditional systems, from new and emerging media to academic disciplines, by using computational tools and technologies to subvert power dynamics and the norms of control [Keeling 2014, 152–154]. In this sense, queer OS is a theory, method, and framework for doing artistic or academic work that has always existed within fields like film and media studies and the digital humanities. Queer OS is not only a way to “help nuance understandings of queer, gender, and technology”. Keeling also references Wendy Chun's and Beth Coleman's writing on “race as technology” to think through how queer OS can be viewed as intersectional and interdisciplinary [Keeling 2014, 155–156]. Within the Black digital humanities, I view queer OS as a framework that can be used to demonstrate how to incorporate the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality into the study of technology and digital culture and the development of more diverse and inclusive scholarship. By outlining a way to apply the strategies of LGBTQIA+ communities and queer theory to platforms and operating systems, Keeling also uses queer OS as a reading practice that traces the queering of scholarly texts (and fields) over time.

Like version control in Git, utilizing queer OS allows the user to save different copies or versions of the same project,

thereby showing how theory develops over time. In the university setting, version control is also about doing your due diligence; it is the archive, the history, or the record of how things were done in the past. Therefore, queer OS helps answer the question of who was involved in completing specific projects and publications by identifying current projects in process and past projects that should be replicated or joined together. By taking on these debates in the Black digital humanities, I use this essay to outline the many versions of the field that have developed over time. From a Black queer and femme perspective, this means noting the spaces where the field leans towards inclusion and diversity and citing the projects and people that should have more visibility.

Additionally, there are many ways in which #BlackDH scholarship always already operates through a queer and femme digital praxis. In contrast to a radical politics of inclusivity, in the article “Between Butch/Femme: On the Performance of Race, Gender, and Sexuality in a YouTube Web Series”, I write about what Roderick Ferguson describes as the “radical politics of invisibility” that come with queer and femme representations of gender and sexuality [Day 2018, 271]. In many ways, Black queer and femme communities are hidden in plain sight within online and offline spaces through their unique uses of language and the reliance on shared recognition, witnessing, and standpoint epistemologies to understand who is and is not included within the community.

This understanding of Black queer and femme politics is also articulated in the book *The Witch's Flight*, where Kara Keeling thinks through the uses of community-based epistemologies by asking:

How can knowledge be forged and shared without being detected by those with the power to prevent that knowledge from exerting a counter-hegemonic force? In what ways are subjugated knowledge produced, and how do they survive attempts to incorporate them into dominant regimes of knowledge and their modes of production? [Keeling 2007, 7]

While many scholars have seen the invisibility of Black digital humanities as a problem to be solved within the field, there is also radical potential that comes with being hidden in plain sight within multiple fields, disciplines, and digital projects. For the Black digital humanities in particular, adopting a Black queer and femme digital praxis means exercising a politics of invisibility that can critique the center of digital humanities scholarship from the margins while continuing to build a field that centers itself. This “calling out” and “calling in” of the larger digital humanities field (and even Black studies) can also be likened to the Black queer and femme praxis of reading and throwing shade.

In the essay “Black Data”, Shaka McGlotten defines reading and throwing shade as “interpretive and performative black queer practices” [McGlotten 2016, 279]. Within digital spaces, many Black queer and trans folx use the practice of reading to banter with each other and critique societal structures that uphold belief systems that oppress the community. This includes but is not limited to racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, classism, xenophobia, and kink-shaming. Additionally, reading can be general in its directive or aimed at a specific person who has offended the community. Throwing shade can also be viewed as critiquing the corporate and neocolonial norms of digital media platforms or academic institutions.

Both online and offline, a read can be as simple as stating the obvious about someone's appearance or activities, while throwing shade often takes the form of a well-timed insult or quick come-back. Therefore, reading and throwing shade can be viewed as a Black queer and femme digital praxis that offers Black digital humanities scholarship the tools to call out what McGlotten calls the “defacement, opacity, and encryption” of technological and institutional systems [McGlotten 2016, 279]. Engaging in a Black queer and femme digital praxis aligns with important principles of Black digital humanities, including a focus on connecting the community, fostering recognition, and experiencing pleasure while engaging in activism or organizing, and raising awareness through public critique.

Consequently, I use this article to raise awareness about where the Black digital humanities come from and what a more intersectional #BlackDH can be. While there is already a significant body of research on #BlackDH, I started this article by examining canonical digital humanities literature to show how the lack of intersectional scholarship in the larger field led to #transformDH and the recognition and development of Black digital humanities across various disciplines. However, instead of viewing Black digital humanities as existing on the fringes of DH scholarship, we should recognize that it has found ways to represent and acknowledge its community through digital praxis, such as

As this outline of the crucial moments in the development of the Black digital humanities has shown, the field continues to receive recognition both within and outside the digital humanities. By analyzing different definitions and debates in #BlackDH, it is evident that it is a field that encompasses the interdisciplinary nature of Black studies and the methodological prowess of digital humanities. Therefore, the Black digital humanities contribute significantly to both Black studies and digital humanities by expanding the possibilities of both fields and promoting more significant investment in data and information science. As a transformative assemblage of critical work, the Black digital humanities will continue growing and spreading through collaboration, scholarship, pedagogy, and social networks.

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