

## Digital Sankofa: Understanding the Past and Futures of Black Digital Humanities

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### Abstract

In an increasingly digital and digitized world, weaved in algorithms, the meaning and importance of the emerging field of Black digital humanities (Black DH) is central to our understanding of the experiences of Black people. This special issue builds on previous publications to center Black people and Blackness in the current world through the lenses of Black DH, setting the stage for the various meanings and roles Black DH can play in its intersection with others fields and practices that affect Black humanity and experience.

The journey to conceptualizing this special issue started in a summer seminar organized by the Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR). Since 2004, through its postdoctoral fellowship program, CLIR has recruited, trained, and established cohorts of talented researchers steeped in the materials and methods of their disciplines for work in libraries and cultural organizations. In recent years, the program has endeavored to advance a sophisticated understanding of production, management, and re-use of research data and to contribute to a sustainable infrastructure for future research. Beginning in 2019, CLIR initiated the recruitment of postdoctoral researchers with a focus on methods and processes pertaining to the execution of research in African American and African Studies. The Data Curation Fellowships for African American and African Studies (AAAS) provided an opportunity for scholars to explore AAAS in the digital world and to contribute to the curation of data using approaches that are mindful of issues such as privilege, identity, access, erasure, privacy, and technology.

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CLIR's seminar created a space for these fellows and their supervisors to engage in conversations related to various topics. Participants discussed topics such as a) understanding the emerging field of Black digital humanities; b) defining the future of Black digital humanities; and c) the intersection of emerging technologies with Black experiences. CLIR's postdoctoral fellowships in data curation for AAAS built on the work of researchers like Kim Gallon, Catherine Knight Steele, André Brock, and Moya Bailey in defining the field. Fellows also benefited from the works of scholars such as Gabrielle Foreman, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and Safiya U. Noble in our discussions about the future of Black digital humanities.

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As Alanna Prince and Cara Marta Messina argue, more work still needs to be done to center Black digital humanities [Prince and Messina 2022]. Similarly, we contend that there is also a critical need to center Black voices in Black digital humanities. We acknowledge that Black digital humanities has gained much ground and is in the process of establishing itself as a field of research in its own right. The 2020 death of George Floyd increased interest in Black experiences, bringing more light to the work that scholars like those mentioned above have been doing for years. In our increasingly wired and digitized lives, interactions, culture, and society, Black digital humanities is rightly situated to be the space that explores emerging technologies and Blackness, the space that shapes new methods and practices in fields seeking to address and understand issues of race, power, and access. This field is a space to examine how technology is used to study, define, and present Black people's experiences, culture, and history in various settings.

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More than any other field, we contend that inherent to Black digital humanities work is information, formation,

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transformation, and crosspollination of scholars and the public that engage with this work. By informing, we mean educating on the work of Black scholars, innovative approaches to digital spaces, and projects that center Black people in digital humanities [Prince and Messina 2022]. Formation implies situating Black digital humanities as a field in its own right and providing a space for individuals to make sense of Blackness in the digital age. We conceive transformation as shaping research and practices to reflect the joy and fun of Black lives in their multiple forms. With cross-pollination, we imply the free-flow of concepts, practices, and thoughts from Black digital humanities to other fields and vice versa, which encourages knowledge sharing and dialogue [Cramer and Tichenor 2023]. This special issue builds on previous research to advance and situate Black digital humanities in relation to other fields. It also points to the practice of learning and teaching inherent to Black digital humanities.

For this special issue, we situated Black digital humanities in different contexts. In doing so, we intended to avoid the creation of a “single story”, to refrain from presenting Blackness “as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again” in the digital world. Connecting with the histories and pasts that inform Black digital humanities to advance the field and shape its future, we drew on *Sankofa*, which is an Akan proverb as well as a philosophical perspective from the broader Ashanti language group in Ghana, West Africa. *Sankofa* means “we must go back and reclaim our past so we can move forward; so, we understand why and how we came to be who we are today” [Aboagye 2022, 8]. Digital *Sankofa* is therefore about reclaiming how Blackness and Black people have been constructed in digital spaces to define but also develop new ways of thinking as time passes in the field of Black digital humanities. Hence, we think of the intersection of the past and future of Blackness and Black people with technology and other fields. This approach reduces the barriers posed by the complexity and specialized language typical of academic articles, thereby enhancing the dissemination of ideas beyond common Black digital humanities circles.

## Articles Included in This Special Issue

The result is a collection of six articles that are both conceptual and practical in nature. The papers, which are described briefly below, represent current and ongoing efforts to engage in the practice of Black digital humanities in today's environments as well as learning contexts. It is our hope that these articles will offer insight into how scholars are defining Black digital humanities and attend to issues of technology from a Black lens.

The six articles that make up this special issue are organized into three distinct themes: (1) perspectives on Black digital humanities and its future; (2) centering Blackness in digital spaces; and (3) owning the stories and experiences of Black people.

“Debates in #BlackDH: Key Moments and Queer Directions in Black Studies Scholarship” by Faithe J. Day situates the critical role of Black digital humanities at the intersection of identity and digital studies. Drawing on the research and researchers within and outside Black studies, the article shows how Black digital humanities can expand by including Black feminist, queer, and justice-oriented perspectives. Day contends that by engaging with the past, present, and future of Black studies, the Black digital humanities will only continue to grow and spread through its own social and scholarly networks as a transformative assemblage of critical and queer work.

In “Bridging the Gap of Exhibition Design, Instructional Design, and the Learning Sciences for the Future of Black Digital Humanities”, Rebecca Y. Bayeck examines the connections between Black digital humanities and the fields of exhibition design, instructional design, and the learning sciences. Focusing on key elements of these fields, this paper shows their relevance to the Black digital humanities. The author also argues that Black digital humanities has at its core principles and practices that call for equity and inclusion. Finally, the author speaks to how the dialogue between Black digital humanities and other fields can create new frameworks for inclusion, design, and learning for all.

“Library Professionals: Instrumental in Black Digital Humanities” by Jina DuVernay reflects on the current divide between library professionals and scholars in Black digital humanities. Drawing on her experience as a librarian, the author argues that bridging the gap between library professionals and Black digital humanities scholars will benefit this emerging field. Given the extent to which library professionals engage in digital humanities-related projects, DuVernay highlights the importance of learning more about the field of Black digital humanities to aid scholars in advancing their work.

“Decolonial by Design: Building *Sekuru’s Stories*” by Jennifer Kyker emerges from a co-authored digital humanities project that contributes toward the decoloniality of knowledge by preserving the music and oral histories of Zimbabwean *mbira* player Sekuru Tute Chigamba. Through the her work with Sekuru and the case study of *Sekuru’s Stories*, the author shows how digital humanities projects can serve as a tool to highlight and tell the stories of Black people that went unheard or ignored as a result of colonization.

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Angela Sutton and Jessica Power’s “Community-Driven Linked Data Approaches in *Builders and Defenders*: Nashville’s Historical Black Civil War Database” discusses the development of the *Builders and Defenders* database, which collects biographical information on the Black Civil War-era population of Fort Negley in Tennessee. The authors reflect on the creation of the database, which required critical collaboration with the community of Nashville, as well as intentional engagement in collective decisions and conversations with descendants, public and academic historians, computer scientists, and software developers. The article centers Black voices, histories, and experiences, offering fresh insights into the interpretations and meanings surrounding the history of Fort Negley.

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Finally, “Infrastructural Sovereignty in the Black Atlantic” by Dhanashree Thorat focuses on the June 2019 Google announcement of a new undersea fiber-optic cable line connecting Portugal and South Africa, which was named “Equiano” after Olaudah Equiano, an eighteenth-century Black man who was kidnapped from his Igbo village and sold into slavery. This article reads Google’s infrastructural initiative against the grain of Equiano’s autobiographical narrative to locate how the violent afterlives of slavery and colonialism manifest in and undergird internet infrastructure projects today.

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The editors of this special issue hope our readers find value in the articles chosen and welcome any feedback. To close, we want to recognize the contributions of several individuals who played crucial roles in the development of this special issue, especially Dr. Christa Williford and the staff of *Digital Humanity Quarterly*.

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## Works Cited

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