

Library Professionals: Instrumental in Black Digital Humanities

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Abstract

Librarians and archivists, particularly those whose work focuses on resources pertaining to the Black diaspora, play a vital role in the field of Black digital humanities. Yet, all too often they are left out of conversations surrounding the Black digital humanities. This is a missed opportunity. Reflecting on my own work as a library professional, I argue that bridging the gap between the Black digital humanities and the social sciences, particularly library science, can prove to be incredibly fruitful in all phases of a digital humanity project.

Librarians, archivists, and other library professionals, particularly those whose work focuses on resources pertaining to the Black diaspora, play a vital role in the field of Black digital humanities. In addition to teaching, many library professionals provide subject area expertise in the humanities to create, curate, and preserve resources that document the history and culture of Black people. As such, their work extends to the digital humanities in that these library professionals digitize historical materials, create and share born-digital resources, and think deeply about questions of access. Yet, all too often library professionals are left out of conversations surrounding the Black digital humanities. This is a missed opportunity. Reflecting on my own work as a library professional, I argue that bridging the gap between the Black digital humanities and the social sciences, particularly library science, can prove to be incredibly fruitful in all phases of a digital humanities project.

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Current State of Collaboration

The work of some library professionals closely aligns with that of digital humanists. As scholars in other fields, academic library professionals publish books and articles, lead digital projects, and teach classes on how to utilize different digital tools and resources. In addition, they research, collect, preserve, and make accessible digitized and born-digital resources. Many learn basic coding skills in library school, create finding aids, and catalog archival materials and other resources in the library. These are just a few examples of how library professionals are making significant contributions to the field, and these skills should be considered an asset to any digital humanities scholarship. However, while rightly criticizing gaps and silences in library archives, digital humanities scholarship has sometimes elided the labor of library professionals who are passionately and diligently working behind the scenes, often dealing with very difficult circumstances across a range of institutional challenges. As a result, some scholars do not utilize the expertise of library professionals, are unaware of their skillset, or simply overlook their contributions to digital humanities altogether.

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The relative lack of collaboration between Black digital humanists and library professionals, I argue, can also be explained by the fact that some institutions lack the infrastructure to implement digital scholarship on campus. While there are many colleges and universities that have successfully incorporated digital humanities work into their academic spaces, there are many more institutions that have yet to do so. Many factors may account for this, such as a lack of funding or expertise, or a perceived lack of interest amongst faculty, staff, and students. However, collaborating with those on campus who have knowledge in the area of digital scholarship is advantageous for humanities scholars, especially those at institutions that have little to no funding to create digital labs, centers, or other dedicated spaces for digital humanities scholarship. Thus, seeking out assistance from colleagues across campus is imperative.

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Why Collaboration Matters

Humanities scholars at underfunded institutions or institutions that have yet to embrace digital humanities scholarship in earnest ought to turn to their libraries for assistance. Indeed, the tremendous uptick in digital humanities positions within college and university libraries in recent years, itself a response to the steady rise in digital humanities scholarship, indicates that library professionals would be an asset to digital humanities and specifically to Black digital humanities. Humanities scholars may be surprised to learn that their institution employs a Digital Humanities Librarian or Archivist, a Digital Initiatives and Resources Librarian, a Digital Scholarship Archivist, or even a Digital Humanities Specialist, to name a few of the positions that have been implemented in recent years. These positions suggest that institutions are increasingly positioning their libraries to respond to the growing demand for more collaboration and assistance with digital tools and projects. It is increasingly possible for humanities scholars to visit their institution's library and find library professionals ready to provide instruction on digital tools, assist with research needs, and share invaluable knowledge as collaborators on digital humanities projects.

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In particular, library professionals whose work is dedicated to staying abreast of new scholarship and resources that pertain to Black history and culture would likely have much to add to the planning, research, design, and development of any Black digital humanities projects. These professionals hold titles such as African American Studies Librarian, Black Diaspora Archivist, and Curator for African American Collections.

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Though some institutions have not yet established a concentrated position or dedicated space to focus solely on fostering digital humanities, all is not lost. It is not a librarian's job to know all things, but it is their job to know how to find all things. Oftentimes, this knowledge results from assisting a wide variety of researchers and from undertaking continual professional development. It is safe to say that in the field of library sciences, an effective library professional is a nosy one! In fact, to be effective, library professionals must seek to know the current trends in scholarship across various disciplines. Once library professionals have gained additional knowledge and practice in digital humanities, they can share their newly acquired skills with scholars at their institutions. Even though some institutions do not have funding for professional development in digital humanities, library professionals can and should seek out opportunities independently.

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Bridging the Gap through Professional Development

As a librarian and archivist, I am constantly seeking ways to stay abreast of new and emerging scholarship to be effective in the field of library and information science. I strive to know a little bit about a lot of things in order to assist a vast array of researchers and the community at large, principally the Black community. I offer here some examples of opportunities that have made a difference to my professional path, in hopes that some of these might serve as bridges for others as well. As a way to continue to develop professionally, I have sought out learning opportunities which have been an important way for me to gain new knowledge about digital humanities. For example, in 2022, I applied for and was selected to participate in the inaugural California Digital Humanities Research Institute. This new endeavor was inspired by The City University of New York's digital humanities research institute and was hosted by UCLA Libraries and UC Irvine Libraries. That year, the theme for the free Digital Ethnic Studies Institute was "The Black Press". The virtual three-day institute featured three keynote speakers and was geared towards those interested in learning about foundational geographic information systems as well as text mining tools that use open datasets related to African American history. It was a wonderful opportunity to not only learn about different digital projects, but to also meet others who were interested in the intersection of Black studies and digital humanities.

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Another opportunity that I took advantage of was a virtual pre-conference at the Recovering the U.S. Hispanic Literary Heritage Conference, which highlighted digital tools and emphasized using archives for digital scholarship. I have also benefited from several virtual workshops facilitated by the Atlanta University Center Data Science Initiative, where I learned more about how data sciences can be used across all disciplines.

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Collaborative relationships and contributions to digital projects have also helped me forge connections within the scholarly community. For instance, I have been a proud scholar of the University of Kansas' Black Book Interactive

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Project. As a scholar in the Introduction to the Digital Humanities Program, I was introduced to many exciting digital projects that involved Black literature. Additionally, I am a member of the steering committee for the Recovery Hub for American Women Writers and have enjoyed contributing as a reviewer to a digital project on the archive of Gloria Naylor.

Moreover, I have been an editor-at-large for dh+lib, a research affiliate for the Digital Inquiry Speculation Collaboration Optimism Network, and a copyeditor for The Center for Black Digital Research/#DigBlk. I have also attended several virtual workshops offered by Clark Atlanta University's Center for Africana Digital Humanities, for which I created a bibliography on Black digital humanities to accompany their workshops. These are all activities through which library professionals, particularly those new to the field, can contribute meaningfully and gain important professional experience. Programs like these are important entry points and ways to build skills, discover potential collaborators, and learn the landscape so that we can help others navigate and learn.

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Conclusion

As institutions continue to embrace and implement digital humanities positions, labs, and centers in their libraries, archives, and departments, collaboration on digital humanities projects will become much more beneficial. Scholars interested in Black digital humanities can start where they are by banding together and assessing their available resources, the library being arguably the most important. The opportunities for librarians and archivists to learn and grow in the digital humanities are ripe for the taking. Library professionals, including those currently working in digital humanities positions as well as those with other specialties who nonetheless participate in digital humanities professional development opportunities, are uniquely trained and prepared to collaborate on digital humanities projects. Therefore, Black digital humanists and library professionals can bridge the gap by working together.

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