

Social Media as a Digital Humanities Platform? A conversation between Rendering Revolution co-founders, Jonathan Michael Square and Siobhan Meĩ

Siobhan Meĩ <siobhanander_at_umass_dot_edu>, University of Massachusetts Amherst  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9395-2286>

Jonathan Michael Square <squaj264_at_newschool_dot_edu>, Parsons School of Design

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Abstract

This article offers an overview of the digital humanities methods and theories that inform the project *Rendering Revolution: Sartorial Approaches to Haitian History*. In this article, project co-founders Jonathan Square and Siobhan Meĩ engage in a conversation about their collaborative model for doing public-facing scholarship at the intersections of black and Caribbean digital humanities. Specifically, Meĩ and Square critically consider the role of social media in building and sustaining their project, which uses the lens of fashion and material culture to trace the aesthetic, social, and political reverberations of the Haitian Revolution. Through the collaborative effort of a team whose expertise lies in translation, visual culture, and cultural theory, *Rendering Revolution* uses Instagram to connect the past and present in ways that are visually compelling and exemplify the power of social media as a tool for scholarly communication.

Introduction

Siobhan Meĩ (SM) and Jonathan Michael Square (JMS) founded the digital humanities project, *Rendering Revolution: Sartorial Approaches to Haitian History* in the spring of 2020. *Rendering Revolution* is a queer, bilingual, feminist experiment in digital interdisciplinary scholarship. They use the lens of fashion and material culture to trace the aesthetic, social, and political reverberations of the Haitian Revolution as a world-historical moment. By focusing on stories of self-fashioning that rarely receive attention in colonial archives, *Rendering Revolution* explores the many ways in which modern identities (and concepts such as human rights) were formed in relation to the legacy of slavery in the Americas. The materials produced, curated, and translated for this project focus on the activities of occluded figures in history, including women and members of the LGBTQIA+ community. Drawing on black feminist thought and transnational queer methodologies, *Rendering Revolution* generates a transhistorical, undisciplined archive that illustrates the importance of material culture in constructing diverse (and often competing) visions of freedom in the Atlantic world.

In this article, co-founders Meĩ and Square speak about the origins of the project, their methods, goals, and recent activities, including a brick-and-mortar exhibition based on their project which opened at Parsons School of Design in the early months of 2025. In particular, they address their use of the social media platform Instagram as a vehicle for *Rendering Revolution* and, in so doing, speak to the situation of their project in the context of black digital humanities, Latin American studies, and fashion studies. Meĩ and Square have staged their contribution to this special issue as a conversation in order to highlight how collaboration, exchange, and dialogue are central to their methods as digital humanists working in the age of social media and artificial intelligence. As computing technologies become increasingly powerful and ubiquitous in daily life, Meĩ and Square believe it is important to emphasize the complexity and radical

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possibility of human relationships, specifically within digital humanities, a field that openly recognizes the importance of collaboration and authorial plurality to humanistic inquiry.

Why Social Media? A Conversation Between Humanists in the Age of AI and Big Data

SM: Let's start at the very beginning. Jonathan, how did we meet?

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JMS: In 2019 you graciously invited me to speak at UMass Amherst, where you were a PhD candidate and where you are now a faculty member. The day after the talk, we got coffee, and you mentioned the idea for this project. I loved it and asked if I could be a part of it. After I left Amherst, we corresponded for several months. Your co-parent Tom designed the project's logo. We designed the website and launched the Instagram account. Then, in the summer of 2020, we went live! In some ways, it was a pandemic baby.

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SM: Your account of our first meeting is so sweet. I was, in fact, so nervous to meet you! I had been following your work at *Fashioning the Self in Slavery and Freedom* for some time. *Fashioning the Self* is a scholarly and artistic venture examining the historic and aesthetic relationships between fashion and slavery in the Americas. The project lives primarily on Facebook and Instagram, which is where I discovered it circa 2018. When I found *Fashioning the Self* I was just beginning my dissertation research, which explored the relationship between textiles and storytelling in contemporary counternarratives of slavery. At the time, I knew very little about the field of fashion studies, but *Fashioning the Self* opened this new door to me. Because *Fashioning the Self* was so public-facing and deeply engaged with its audiences on social media, I felt invited to interact with the short-form scholarship you published, to share it, and to ask questions. I began to think to myself — oh, this is a paradigm for knowledge production that feels not only accessible, but deeply accountable to a broad and diverse public audience. Your work was no small inspiration to me as I began to imagine how one might do scholarship otherwise in the humanities.

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All of this to say, when we met in that coffee shop in Amherst, I was intimidated and was experiencing feelings of being an imposter — what if Jonathan isn't interested in working together? I think it is important to reiterate your description of what we were up to at the time: I was a graduate student at a state university and you were contingent faculty at Harvard — my perception of hierarchies and elitism in academia shaped who I thought I was “qualified” to work with, who I permitted myself to see as a peer. At our first meeting I did not see myself as your peer by any stretch. But — and this is so important to state because it is so rare — from the moment we sat down together you made me feel like not only your peer, but a co-conspirator in imagining new ways of knowing and being in academia. Your politics and practice of deep listening — to the archives, to people both within and outside of your communities — is what makes *Fashioning the Self* so powerful and rigorous, and, I would hope, our project, *Rendering Revolution*, as well. And, since we're thinking about the past, do you remember our first post?

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JMS: Like it was yesterday. Nikki Willson wrote it. We are really big fans of her work and her *Fanm Rebèl* project. In many ways, it is a sister project of *Rendering Revolution*. We asked her to write about a painting of Catherine Flon by Haitian-American artist Patricia Brintle. In many ways, this artwork and post about it embodies the ethos of our project. It was written about a female figure who is understudied, yet central to the Haitian Revolution. Secondly, it was not written by us. Our project has been explicitly collaborative from the beginning. This aligns with what Marisa Parham refers to as “material conditions” for digital humanities work that resist hierarchy and center care and collectivity (Parham, 2018). Like many of the artists and curators we admire, we believe in modes of authorship that are intentionally plural and resistant to individualist frameworks of scholarly success.

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SM: You're exactly right that this post exemplifies the goals and ethos of the project — centering women and queer people in our explorations of Haitian history and highlighting the relationships and collaborations that make it possible to share and discuss the actions and legacies of these individuals. *Fanm Rebèl* is also a project we draw much inspiration from because, while it has an important digital dimension and online presence, much of Willson's work is in the material, public sphere — of ensuring, in particular, that Queen Marie Louise Christophe's legacy — the first and only queen of Haiti — is physically visible and memorialized in places such as London, where she lived in exile with her two daughters

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in the early 19th century. With our exhibition, *Revolisyon Toupatou*, which ran at Parsons School of Design in January and February of 2025, we had a similar goal — to illustrate how digital humanities work is deeply rooted in the material world, in people coming together in physical space, not just interacting in digital environments.

I think the *Fanm Rebèl* project and other digital humanities projects that operate at the intersections of Caribbean and black DH, such as *Hidden Hands in Colonial Natural Histories*, directed by Victoria Dickinson and Anna Winterbottom; *LifeXCode*, directed by Jessica Marie Johnson; and *Archipelagos*, edited and founded by Alex Gil and Kaiama Glover, have demonstrated that, in many ways, the power of digital humanities work lies in the possibility of forging new connections with people we may not have met or known otherwise and that these connections can be nurtured and realized in the form of conversations, art, performance, writing, roundtables, workshops, celebrations, social media likes, reshares, and comments, etc. As these projects have demonstrated to me, I think in its most beautiful and powerful iterations, digital humanities work centers the imagination and possibility afforded by human relationships, often in spite of academic, industry and oppressive social structures that too often keep artists, curators, activists, students, and professors in separate spheres of operation. Martha S. Jones writes about this in “The Power to Create: Building Alternative (Digital) Worlds” [Glover, Jones, and Johnson 2023] a conversation with Jessica Marie Johnson moderated by Kaiama L. Glover, specifically with regard to forging her own communities within (and sometimes in spite of) academia:

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I was remembering today that the first time I did an exhibition, a brick-and-mortar exhibition — it couldn't have been more conventional — and I shared it with the colleagues in my department. Someone sort of tossed the postcard on the table and said, ‘We just don't do this.’ And I thought ‘Wow.’ And there are lots of moments like that — the ‘We just don't do this...’ So, what to do? For me, it has been to fugue. It has been to flee. It has been to find and to construct another kind of community within the vastness that is many of our universities. My best compatriots, my allies, my fellow travelers have been librarians, and curators, and artists [Glover, Jones, and Johnson 2023].

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I appreciate Jones's reflections, particularly around fugue, or marronage, a concept that she and Johnson explore at length in their exchange. I see our project as the result of a fugue: in building *Rendering Revolution*, we sought to escape a confining and narrow structure for scholarly production, and in so doing we wanted to run toward people — in the direction of artists and designers whose work we admired, of translators whose labor makes it possible to communicate across linguistic and cultural boundaries, of other researchers who were keen to center collaboration as a model for humanistic inquiry. Like Jones, I feel like we have built our own community and it is ever-evolving.

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JMS: Over the course of running this project, we have developed our own particular methodology/creative practice. Sometimes we take an “everything but the kitchen sink” approach, posting anything remotely related to Haitian visual culture. However, I always return to a fundamental insight you shared with me, Siobhan: the core of our project is deeply rooted in black feminist praxis and queer theory. Our approach is also shaped by a recognition that visual archives of blackness have historically been curated through frameworks of violence or erasure. By creating our own curated grid, we take cues from projects like “Black Futures,” which imagine archival practice as an embodied, present-tense act of care and radical possibility.

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SM: Definitely. At the time we began the project I was deeply inspired by the work of Saidiya Hartman and Fabiola Jean-Louis. Though they work in distinct modalities (writing for Hartman, visual art for Jean-Louis) their feminist experiments with aesthetics — textual and sculptural — powerfully create space for reading forms — bodies, fictions — as valuable and intimately connected sites of knowledge creation about the past. For example, Hartman's 2008 article, “Venus in Two Acts” examines the silences in slavery's archive with regard to recorded (textual and visual) information regarding the lived experiences of enslaved people. Hartman suggests that acts of violent erasure in the archive produce a historical epistemology in which silence is accepted as fact, thus determining, contouring, the possibilities for knowledge-creation about slavery and its operation as a social, political, and economic system. The practice of calling attention to and working against this epistemology is, as Hartman writes, “predicated upon impossibility”:

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—listening for the unsaid, translating misconstrued words, and refashioning disfigured lives — and intent on achieving an impossible goal: redressing the violence that produced numbers, ciphers,

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and fragments of discourse, which is as close as we come to a biography of the captive and the enslaved [Hartman 2008, 2–3]

Here Hartman identifies practices of redress and refashioning that are central to the very premise of *Rendering Revolution* as a digital humanities project. She suggests that engaging seriously with material culture in the archives — specifically histories of textiles, dyeing, sewing, and dress practices — is critical to shaping not only what we know about the embodied and lived experiences of enslaved peoples in Saint Domingue, including women, girls, and queer people, but also how we identify historical sources understood to be “authoritative,” “truthful,” or “factual.”

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Similarly, an intellectual and artist whose work also deeply influenced and shaped our project's methods and goals is Fabiola Jean-Louis, a paper-sculpture concept artist who was born in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, and currently resides and works in Brooklyn, NY. Jean-Louis is known for sculpting intricate and beautiful period gowns out of paper. I had the privilege of seeing one of Jean-Louis's sculptural dress pieces at her solo show at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston in the spring of 2025.

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Figure 1. Justice of Ezili, 2021. Paper, gold, Swarovski crystals, lapis lazuli, labradorite, brass, ink, and resin. Photos from the exhibition “Waters of the Abyss: An Intersection of Spirit and Freedom,” a solo show at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston featuring Fabiola Jean-Louis (born 1978). “Waters of the Abyss” ran from February 27 to May 25, 2025. Photo credit: Siobhan Meï.

Constructed from what was originally white paper, this dress sculpture is composed of a variety of precious materials including 24-karat gold, lapis lazuli, amethyst, labradorite, and Swarovski crystals. Titled “Justice of Ezili,” the dress recalls the power, creativity, and beauty of the eponymous Vodou lwa. The folds of the dress incorporate histories of adornment that were intimately tied to the transatlantic slave trade in which valuable textiles such as chintz served as powerful forms of economic and cultural currency. Before this dress sculpture traveled to Boston, it served as an anchor within the Afrofuturist period room “Before Yesterday We Could Fly” on display at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Describing the significance of “Justice of Ezili” as it contributed to the Afrofuturist vision of “Before Yesterday We Could Fly,” curator Hannah Beachler commented on how the position of dress — at rest, seated — summons a version of the past that she rarely feels called to acknowledge: “She occupies a space between the future and the past in beautiful clothing, at rest in the past. Which you never see. And it became very important not so much about evoking a person as much as evoking a way of being that you do not know. And to be able to see that, it did something to me. It changed how I carried myself” [Metropolitan Museum of Art 2021]. As Beachler’s reflections suggest, the situation of “Justice of Ezili” at the threshold between past and future is a gesture that underscores the significance of dress as it draws attention to stories of embodied life that are too often ignored, inaccessible, or rendered invisible. Jean-Louis’s emphasis on the power of materiality — of fashion — for understanding the past and imagining the future — is critical to our own methods in exploring Haitian fashion and material histories across time and space.

JMS: Another memorable moment for me in the beginning our project was reading your review [Meï 2020], in *The Fashion Studies Journal* of the exhibition *Fugitifs* at the Musée National des Beaux Arts du Québec. This exhibition

featured renderings of self-emancipated freedom seekers. The artist used images from runaway slave ads to recreate their likenesses. That exhibition was an early inspiration for us, as we aimed to highlight visual representation of femme and/or queer figures from the Haitian Revolution (i.e., Cécile Fatiman, Romaine-la-Prophétesse, Suzanne Louverture, Catherine Flon, etc.) who did not always have the opportunities to sit for portraits.

SM: I appreciate you mentioning that exhibition, which was beautiful and centered knowledge-production about slavery by contemporary artists of African descent in Québec. That review was also one of my first open-source publications, as the *FSJ* is a fully online and open-access journal. I was really excited to share that article on my personal social media platforms knowing that friends and family could easily access it. In this vein, let's talk about social media! We use it! In many ways, the Instagram account is the organizing motor of *Rendering Revolution*. It is also an archive of what we were “herding out on” at a particular moment, i.e., an evolution of our intellectual interests.

JMS: I have a great example to illustrate this point. Remember when we were deeply interested in indigo production? We dedicated an entire week to creating content on the cultivation and use of indigo in Haiti. Much of the scholarship on plantation economies rightly focuses on sugar, but we were both fascinated by the significant yet understudied role of indigo in Haiti's plantation economy. We created a post about indigo's use as a bluing agent [Rendering Revolution 2020a] for white garments, another one on the trend of white clothing in the metropole that was inspired by practices in West Africa and the Caribbean, a third post about the role of India and Indian textiles in the global textile trade, and a fourth one on the significance of white clothing in Vodou and other Afro-Diasporic syncretic religions. This comprehensive exploration highlighted the diverse and interconnected uses and cultural meanings of indigo and white clothing across different regions and contexts.

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Figure 2. Screenshot of 2020 Rendering Revolution post on indigo as a bluing agent (taken June 2024).

SM: I really loved that series and appreciate your articulation of one of the key components of our methodology: that it is

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shaped by our own interests, discoveries, and conversations, all of which shift on the daily — here I'm also recalling your earlier characterization of what we choose to dwell on as an “everything but the kitchen sink” approach, which is spot on. In this way, our use of Instagram as the “organizing motor” for our project is worth pausing on and explaining.

As many already know, Instagram was founded as a tech start-up in 2010 in Palo Alto, California, by Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger. What set Instagram apart from other social media products of the time such as Facebook, was that Instagram was designed explicitly for mobile devices as opposed to desktop environments. This development and design choice to create a social app native to smartphones led to a swift increase in Instagram's popularity, as users were able to not only instantaneously share photos taken on their phones from their everyday lives but also modify them in ways previously only those with photography experience could (think cropping, filtering, etc.). Instagram was sold to Facebook in 2012 and its original founders, Systrom and Krieger, left the app in 2019. As of today, Instagram has roughly 2.4 billion users, and as of 2018, 80% of Instagram users are outside of the United States [MacDowall and Budge 2022]. In short, Instagram is a hugely popular and global application due in no small part to its user-friendly interface, its privileging of visual communication, and the fact that, like many social media apps, it is free to use.

Many of these characteristics of Instagram appealed to us as a platform for *Rendering Revolution*— accessibility, instant feedback from other users, immediate publishing, the possibility of discovering new audiences and communities. In particular, given our project's focus on material culture and visual art, Instagram was an easy choice as a “motor” for our project as it was quickly becoming one of the most powerful digital tools on the market for sharing and creating art. Lachlan MacDowall and Kylie Budge's book *Art After Instagram: Art Spaces, Audiences, Aesthetics* (2022) is about (and a testament to) this very dynamic: that Instagram has fundamentally shifted the way humans view and ultimately, produce art. As they write:

[Instagram] has made art and art spaces visually appealing and accessible through the digital screen, and in, doing so, it has shifted the power balance away from those own and command art spaces, especially institutionalized places such as museums and galleries with their authoritatively loaded histories and ambiances, permitting more agency for art audiences as they photograph, post, and share their interpretations of such spaces [MacDowall and Budge 2022, 3].

In our case, we wanted to reach diverse, public audiences that intersected with our academic communities, but did not center them. Instagram allows us to bypass, or skirt, institutional gatekeeping mechanisms within art and scholarship, such as museum entry fees and cultural know-how as well as publishing processes, which in the humanities can take months and often results in output that is only read by a niche group of scholars. In short, we wanted to be in active conversation with artists — specifically Haitian artists and designers, and with people from around the world who were interested in design, aesthetics, fashion and history — in ways that were not mediated by the traditions of academic publishing or the confines of physical space.

We should make it clear however that we do not think that Instagram is a democratizing or even ethical form of media production and consumption — truly, we are trading one form of mediation and surveillance for another in terms of how we achieve the goals of our project. Particularly, given the history of Haiti as a historic site of resistance to European imperialism and US neoliberal extractive capitalism, it is important for us to grapple with and be accountable to how the very vehicle of our project, Instagram, is implicated in larger, nefarious systems of data collection. Meta, Instagram's parent company, continues to face public scrutiny for its practices of selling user data to third party organizations, its role in fueling hate speech, in promoting unlawful discrimination in sectors such as housing and employment, in fostering misinformation online, and in ignoring the negative health impacts of its products on users, particularly children and young people. As digital humanists we believe it is our responsibility to understand not only the history of the technology we use and how it functions, but how technologies such as social media impact human society. Black DH is a field that has historically asserted that being critical of the “powerful rhetorics of empowerment and democracy that underpin many analyses of contemporary media forms” [MacDowall and Budge 2022, 13] is necessary in order to counter conceptualizations of technology as ideologically neutral or passive conduits for human expression (see, for example, Kim Gallon's work on Black Twitter) [Gallon 2016]. While MacDowall and Budge situate their research in the context of platform studies, many of their approaches and assertions could be strengthened by looking to the literature of Black

DH as a field that has asserted, from the aughts onward, that in order to critically engage with social media as products and tools, one must examine their history, their technical architecture, their APIs, and their complex function within a capitalist society in which much of the world's wealth is in the hands of only a few people and many design decisions are shaped by legacies by white supremacy and are often made by investors in products, not by users. Drawing on the work of scholars of Black DH such as Kim Gallon, Jessica Marie Johnson, Kaiama Glover, and Marisa Parham, we understand that we do not currently live in a world of public-interest technology and our own way of talking about *Rendering Revolution* must not make it seem like products such as Instagram are fundamentally radical or liberatory.

J.M.: Yes, and all of this is not to say that ideas and conversations facilitated by digital connectivity are not radical or liberatory or deeply imaginative. In fact, recent history shows us the complicated role social media can play in propelling radical grassroots movements and social change. I'm thinking of social movements of the early and late aughts including the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, #SayHerName, Black Lives Matter, and the Umbrella Revolution, all of which had a significant social media component both in terms of organizing and in launching powerful, often multinational, public awareness campaigns. Considering our use of Instagram in this larger context of social media as a vehicle for activism and for attracting new audiences, we've noticed and come to appreciate that there is a type of agency, liberty, or even just unruliness, afforded by the relationship this social media platform facilitates between audience, technology, and art. This dialogue is also constantly evolving, due in no small part to the ephemerality and transience of social media. While user data is certainly collected and stored somewhere, perhaps permanently, users' lived experience of media online is fleeting: users of platforms such as Instagram consume textual and visual information quickly. At *Rendering Revolution*, we know that some users will sometimes spend no more than a second or two on a post we share, for example. You and I have talked about how we see the ephemerality of posts — the way they will appear in a user's feed and then disappear, often according to an opaque algorithmic system — as very much reflecting the ethos of our project, in that we hope to show how notions of taste, aesthetics, and beauty are socially constructed, ever-evolving, and, deeply contingent on one's identity and experience of the world. The role of contingency is something that [Gallon 2016] explores in her earlier-referenced article "Making a Case for Black Digital Humanities" in which she considers how computing technologies can be used as a lens of sorts to "further expose humanity as a racialized social construction." Like technologist Ruha Benjamin, Gallon suggests that computing technologies cannot be understood outside of the systems and processes of racialization that determine who is considered human. In this way, Gallon reminds readers of the contingency of the category 'human' — a keyword in DH itself that should be understood to be in perpetual construction:

Black digital humanity, with its emphasis on humanity as an evolving category, also changes how we should view the ongoing concerns about sustainability and the future of digital projects. Recognizing that humanity is a construct, a contingent idea, forces digital humanities to come to terms with the contingency of digital projects [Gallon 2016].

I appreciate Gallon's emphasis on contingency here, and the way it can, and perhaps should, inform the expectations, goals, and outcomes of black digital humanities work. Our use of Instagram, a corporate social media platform that is deeply entrenched in the logics of late-stage capitalism, obliges us to regularly confront constructs of humanity, specifically the role that computing technologies such as social media play in perpetuating anti-black violence, a very recent example of this being the continued racist portrayals of Haiti and Haitians in the US public media ecosystem. At the same time, the contingency of the Instagram media-form itself has permitted us to create a new sort of logic for knowledge-production in which contingency — ephemerality — is both the context and the modality of our work.

SM: Here, perhaps we can explore this question of contingency further by explaining how we actually built our project at the intersections of our values and our available resources? Our use of a freely available platform (IG) was critical for us at the time we founded the project, given we had very limited financial resources. I think it is worth discussing sustainability here as well as some of the technical backend and funding know-how that makes DH projects like ours tick. In short, how do we do what we do, Jonathan?

JMS: Most digital humanities projects present themselves as altruistic, serving the public in some way. With *Rendering Revolution*, we take a different approach by sometimes prioritizing our own experiences and relationships. We pursue this project because we genuinely enjoy it and find it enriching. We believe that this passion translates into an edifying

experience not only for ourselves but also, hopefully, for our followers. In fact, we prioritize building relationships, communities, and conversations in *Rendering Revolution*, as opposed to a static archive that researchers tap into. This is particularly important as neither you nor I is Haitian, and as such we view our DH contributions to our scholarly and public communities as emerging directly from our active and continuous conversations with those whose identities, histories, and cultural legacies are deeply tied to Haiti and its diaspora.

I think that explains, in part, the bilingual nature of the project. While we are not native Haitian Creole speakers, we have both committed to becoming at least conversant in it. The project is bilingual because we want to reach out to Haitian Creole speakers. However, in all honesty, most of our Haitian and Haitianist audience is also fluent in English, Spanish, and/or French. It is an important exercise for us to challenge ourselves and make the effort to speak to a variety of communities, many of which are multilingual.

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SM: Definitely. And here, I think it is important to talk about funding. Many digital humanities projects are quite expensive to produce and require know-how that many of us trained in the humanities do not necessarily have. When we began the project we had very limited resources and identifying funding continues to be a journey for us! We are grateful to the Massachusetts Society of Professors, Parsons School of Design, The Manning College of Information and Computer Sciences at UMass Amherst, and Mount Holyoke College for helping make our project, particularly its bilingual dimensions, possible. We use the majority of the funding we receive to remunerate and recognize our expert translators. We've also hired a developer who helped us to create our website (which is built on Tumblr!), and we've paid for our domain name which uses .ht, the web designation for Haitian digital content. We received word in December 2024 that we received a Caribbean Digital Scholarship Collective Micro-Grant, which will allow us to not only revamp our website, but also fund our inaugural Maker-Scholar Fellowship, which offers funding to emerging artists from the Caribbean and its diasporas. We are so grateful that organizations like the CDSC exist and with this grant we hope to further develop Online Educational Resources from the project, which will include expanding the syllabus we have put together on our website (which as of now is largely a giant index). Ultimately, and especially for those just beginning their journey in the digital humanities, I would say that it is OK to use what you have at your disposal (i.e. free online software and tools) in order to bring your project to fruition. As you have highlighted, Jonathan, when you're working in close collaboration with others whose values you share, the creative process and problem-solving one does certainly feel less lonely and, in our experience, the funding will eventually come, even if it takes time.

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JMS: Speaking of partnerships, what is the role of collaboration in our project? Collaboration is the driving force behind our project. Siobhan, while you initially conceptualized the project, I quickly became an integral part of it. Our combined efforts have proven that our strengths and weaknesses as scholars are complementary, creating a balanced and dynamic partnership. Together, we have been able to achieve far more than either of us could have accomplished alone. Our collective expertise, perspectives, and dedication are what truly propel this project forward, making it a testament to the power of collaboration in scholarly endeavors.

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SM: Yes, *Rendering Revolution*, as one can see from our Network Page, is composed of a group of people from all over the world. Kai Marcel, Nadège Cherubin, Danielle Dorvil, Nathan Dize, Nicole Willson, Dieulermesson Petit Frère, and Mirline Pierre were, and are, some of the core contributors to the project, many of them hailing from different disciplines and residing in a variety of places, including France, Costa Rica, and the UK. One of the powerful aspects of DH work, in my mind, is how we can push back against the single-author paradigm that continues to play a dominant role in dictating the "value" of research in humanities fields. Very few of our posts have authorial attributions, though we do consistently recognize the name of the translator for a given post. Here, we want to be clear that the work of translation is intellectual work and should be recognized and remunerated as such, countering a long history of invisibilizing the labor of translators, perhaps particularly in the context of humanities scholarship. We want to explore how to write and do research in community with others and in this way, we feel like we need to examine what types of "authorship" make sense for our project (this is, of course, part of a larger conversation within the world of the digital humanities). Considering our collaborations on content creation as a somewhat experimental scholarly and curatorial practice, how does it look in practice? What are the posts that you feel exemplify our project?

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JMS: Our post [Rendering Revolution 2020b] on Romaine-la-Prophétesse in many ways exemplifies the project. He was

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a free black coffee plantation owner who led an early uprising in the Haitian Revolution and later controlled the cities of Léogâne and Jacmel. He defied Catholic gender norms, identifying as a prophétesse rather than a prophète. He wore feminine clothing and spoke of being possessed by a female spirit; yet, he also called himself “the godson of the Virgin Mary.” This transgressive behavior (which is not unusual in Yoruba-derived Afro-Diasporic religious practices, but is rarely condoned within Catholicism) explains why Romaine is often excluded from the pantheon of Haitian revolutionary leadership. In this way, Romaine exemplifies what Bianca Beauchemin terms “sensuous marronage,” a fugitive practice of embodiment and gender expression that resists colonial order. Since there are no surviving portraits of Romaine, artist Manuel Mathieu used his imagination in rendering him, intertwining abstraction and figuration in this diptych.

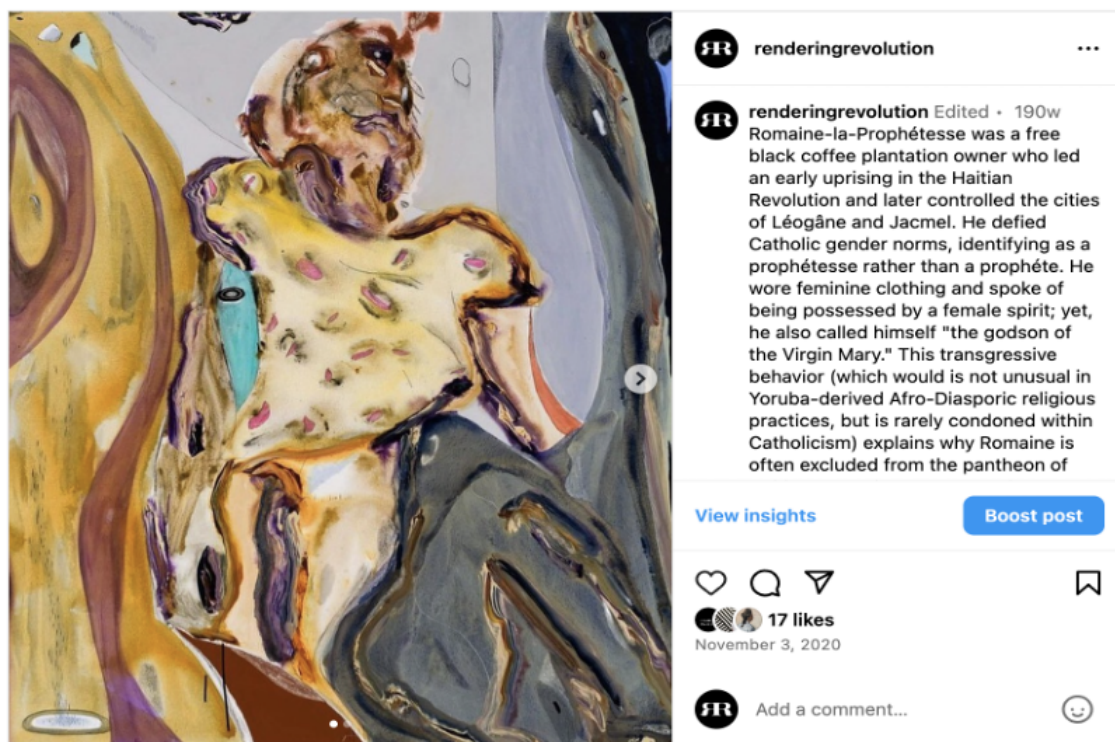


Figure 3. Screenshot of 2020 Rendering Revolution post on Manuel Mathieu’s representation of Romaine-la-Prophétesse (taken June 2024).

SM: There are so many posts I appreciate in our project — our series examining fugitive slave advertisements from the 18th century has been critical to helping us understand the role of textiles and clothing in the context of marronage in Saint Domingue, and for that reason I’m especially invested in those pieces of scholarship. Many were also produced with assistance from other scholars and collaborators such as Robert DuPlessis, a historian of the material Atlantic world who helped us, for example, define and trace *chemise de halle*, a shirt made from a textile that we were unfamiliar with when we first encountered it in a fugitive slave advertisement describing a young man who had stolen his freedom in 1773. In his archival research on trade logs, DuPlessis found *halle* commonly listed along with *brin* — another kind of hemp linen. *Halle* was at one point cheaper than *brin* and other popular linens of the time, including *gingas*. DuPlessis’s research, which he graciously shared with us for this post [Rendering Revolution 2022], shows that *halle* was, at a moment in time, one of most affordable linens available in Saint Domingue.

Though the inclusion of material details relating to dress in these adverts are intended to serve as markers of enslavement, a reader can also draw on these details to imagine people in the context of their pursuit of freedom. To return to this notion of contingency once more, clothes are transitive things in the slavery archive: serving simultaneously as modes of identification for recapture and as critical expressions of identity and self-making. Though fashion’s transitive or ephemeral nature has been linked to its denigration in popular thought as a serious form of human expression, fashion’s transitivity is one of the conditions that makes the re-telling of history possible, particularly when

situated in the context of transatlantic histories of fabric production, trade, and circulation. A post such as this one is thus illustrative of the possibilities for imagining the past by considering not simply the commercial facts, but the embodied histories of textiles in the 18th century.

One of my favorite posts, though, might have to be this one from 2021 on Paulette Poujol-Oriol's 1992 short story, "Le collier" or, "The Necklace" [Rendering Revolution 2021]. Here, we offer a summary of the story, which takes place during the US occupation of Haiti in the early part of the 20th century. "Le collier" describes a young woman, Antonine, and her husband (both of modest means) who must pay back a debt to a wealthy family for having lost an expensive and elegant necklace belonging to them. The story compellingly connects material and political histories in Haiti, situating the class struggle of Haitian artisans in the 20th century within the broader context of the material debt imposed upon the newly formed Haitian state by France in the wake of the Revolution. I appreciate this post because it shows that historical archives are not the only source of knowledge we should consult when it comes to understanding the role that fashion objects and materiality play in constructing human societies. Literature has always been a powerful site for re-imagining the past and for anticipating the future in the Haitian context, and clothing, textiles, and objects of adornment are critical features of storytelling that are worth our attention, as Poujol-Oriol powerfully suggests in "Le Collier."

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Figure 4. Screenshot of 2021 Rendering Revolution post on Paulette Poujol-Oriol's short story, "Le Collier" (taken June 2024).

JMS: We've talked quite a bit up until now about our methods and goals in the project, but we should probably address our project's inclusion in this special issue in particular, which centers DH projects of and on Latin America. How do we see our project in relation to the broader landscape/field of Latin American Studies?

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SM: You and I have been discussing this quite a bit lately. As you helpfully signaled, Jonathan, in our most recent conversation, Latin America is a colonial construction and, often a narrow construction, in terms of accounting for the diversity of cultural, linguistic, and social phenomena in the hemisphere. For example, following their fight for

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independence from the French, Haitians in the early 19th century named their country Haiti (Ayiti in Haitian Creole) using the Taíno name for the island that Haiti and the Dominican Republic currently share, and in so doing, acknowledging and honoring their country's indigenous legacy. Haiti is also the first black republic in the western hemisphere, and this fact remains central to contemporary discussions of Haitian identity. All of this to say, notably perhaps in 2018, there have been public debates (often occurring online) about the relationship between Haitian identity and Latin America, specifically with regard to the question of whether Haitians are Latinx, Afro-Latinx, or neither. I'd say that the inclusion of our project in this special issue is pushing at the boundaries of what is traditionally considered "Latin America." This is due to the ways in which anti-blackness has historically textured Haiti's relationship to other nations in Latin America as well as other anti-colonial and decolonial movements throughout the hemisphere. As contemporary Haitian artist and performer, Nathalie Cerin, writes:

When we gained independence, Dessalines declared us as a nation of Blacks, and any Haitian citizen from that day forward would be known as Black. This established an identity for us that is not rooted in who happened to colonize us and the language they forced on us in the process. The anti-blackness that is at the heart of our exclusion among these nations is not our responsibility to fix. We don't need labels of groups that have neither invited or welcomed us to make us more exotic or palatable. Being Haitian in itself is enough [Cerin 2018].

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These discussions of identity are sometimes contentious and yet are critical to recognize when doing public digital humanities work, particularly given the role that identity plays in the formation of communities, both in the digital world and within physical and imagined geographies. For us, these discussions have been important given that in founding this project we sought to be in conversation with Haitian artists and artists of Haitian descent specifically.

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I want to return to our use of social media to engage a public audience and our project's relationship to the field of Black DH in particular. In "Making a Case for Black Digital Humanities," Kim Gallon theorizes recovery in the field of Black Digital Humanities as a critical praxis, and ultimately, a technology in and of itself. More specifically, she highlights the role that social media plays in recovery projects that center black humanity and experiences. She writes:

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This technology of recovery operates as the shared basis for black academic and nonacademic digital work, one that dominates the ways by which both Black studies scholars and a black public approach technology. Everyday discursive interactions on social media networks are a case in point. Black people's subsistence in and resistance to the complex oppressive systems of slavery, colonialism, Jim Crow, mass incarceration, and police brutality, across time and space, make black lives ground zero for a technology of recovery using social media. Movements that protest the ongoing police brutality of black women and men, which began on "Black Twitter" and Facebook with hashtags such as #SayHerName, #BlackLivesMatter, and #ICantBreathe, continue black people's centuries-old endeavor to make their humanity apparent to the world [Gallon 2016].

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In your mind, Jonathan, how does Gallon's analysis of social media as a technology of recovery in Black Studies speaks to our own use of social media as a platform for doing public digital humanities work?

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JMS: Gallon's analysis of social media as a technology of recovery in Black Studies provides a profound framework for understanding our own use of social media as a platform for public digital humanities work. By engaging with our followers, we tap into a vast reservoir of collective knowledge that enriches our projects. Our followers not only fill in the gaps in our understanding, but also offer invaluable suggestions and critiques that shape our work in meaningful ways. This collaborative process induces collective knowledge production, enabling us to recover and highlight narratives, histories, and perspectives that might otherwise be overlooked or deemed unworthy of preservation. Through this dynamic exchange, we can bring to light stories and insights that contribute to a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of Haitian visual culture.

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We also draw significant inspiration from the Gee's Bend Quilters and other African American quilting traditions, in which artisans transform upcycled scraps into beautiful, intricate quilts. This act of creative repurposing reflects a profound ingenuity and resilience that parallels the artistic expressions found within Haitian visual culture. The colors, patterns,

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and symbolic meanings embedded in these quilts resonate with the rich tapestry of Haitian art, which often incorporates elements of folklore, spirituality, and historical memory. Furthermore, the visual structure of Instagram, with its grid layout, mirrors the patchwork nature of these quilting traditions. Each post, like a quilt square, contributes to a larger, cohesive narrative. Our curated platform leverages this aesthetic alignment to showcase the interconnectedness of Black artistic practices in Haiti and beyond.

SM: Given our project's focus on visual culture, specifically fashion and design, which artists most inspire our work?

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JMS: We truly admire Stella Jean. Her innovative approach is characterized by vibrant patterns and bold prints that celebrate her Haitian-Italian heritage. Jean's work transcends mere clothing, transforming each piece and collection into powerful narratives that evoke her unique identity and heritage. Her commitment to ethical fashion, working closely with artisans around the world, further elevates her designs, ensuring that they are not only visually stunning, but also socially impactful. Though it may be wishful thinking, we would love to collaborate with her in some capacity in the future.

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As you mentioned earlier, we also love Fabiola Jean-Louis. Her work embodies all of the things that we value in our project: Black feminist praxis and creative practice that centers Haiti. She is not only renowned for her attention to detail, but the way those details challenge and redefine traditional representations of Black bodies, including her own.

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SM: I'd also add that we've been delighted to be in conversation with several incredible artists based in the New York and Miami areas including Daveed Baptiste, Steven Baboun, Madjeen Isaac, and Saphyra Saint-Fort.

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Figure 5. *Revolisyon Toupatou* artist roundtable. Pictured from left to right, Steven Baboun, Daveed Baptiste, Madjeen Isaac, Saphyra Saint Fort, Siobhan Meï, Jonathan Michael Square. January 23, 2025, Parsons School of Design. Photo credit: Dylan Yruegas.

While our project examines colonial and historical archives, at *Rendering Revolution* one of our goals is also to create a new, digital archive of our interviews and features of contemporary Haitian artists. As part of this work, we held programming throughout our exhibition that centered the voices and experiences of contemporary artists and designers,

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including an artist panel at the opening reception of *Revolisyon Toupatou* as well as a collaboration with the Fashion Scholarship Fund during New York Fashion Week in February 2025 to highlight the work of emerging Haitian designers such as The Gayo Twins. We also convened two roundtables at the Haitian Studies Association annual conference to be held in Brooklyn, NY in October 2024, one of which was titled “Curating Haitian Art in the Digital Age.” This roundtable, which included curator, artist, and scholar Dr. Petrouchka Moïse and Montréal-based visual and textile artist, Stanley Wany, centered discussions of power, originality, and ownership as these concepts are being negotiated in the era of Big Data and generative AI. In short, we are invested in learning from and celebrating the cultural and intellectual contributions of Haitian artists to critical conversations on the very meaning and role of arts and humanities today.

JMS: As a project deeply engaged with the intersections of art, material culture, and digital innovations, and given your own position within a STEM-focused academic environment, we fully embrace the need to grapple with the implications of emerging technologies. We’re particularly invested in thinking critically about how digital tools, including artificial intelligence, shape knowledge production and dissemination, especially in fields like art, history, and cultural studies. Earlier this year (2024), we shared a post [Rendering Revolution 2024] that explored the potential role of AI in filling gaps in the Haitian visual archive. The responses we received were generative and complex, prompting meaningful dialogue about the stakes of such an approach. These exchanges helped us to recalibrate our own methodology and refine the ways in which we think about the uses and limitations of digital tools and resources in public humanities work.

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At the same time, I often feel that the academic world can be frustratingly reactive or even Luddite in its stance toward technology. Rather than outright rejecting tools like AI, we try to adopt a position of thoughtful engagement: the technology exists, and it is already shaping the cultural and intellectual landscape in which we work. We can either ignore it and cede interpretive control to corporate interests, or we can enter the conversation on our own terms. I would not describe myself as a proponent of AI in any unqualified sense. But I do believe it’s possible, and even necessary, to explore how such tools might be leveraged in ways that align with the values of justice, transparency, and collaboration. For us, it’s about striking a balance and recognizing that while these technologies may never replace the insights that come from lived experience and community-based research, they can serve as a complement to more traditional scholarly methods when approached with care and ecological mindfulness.

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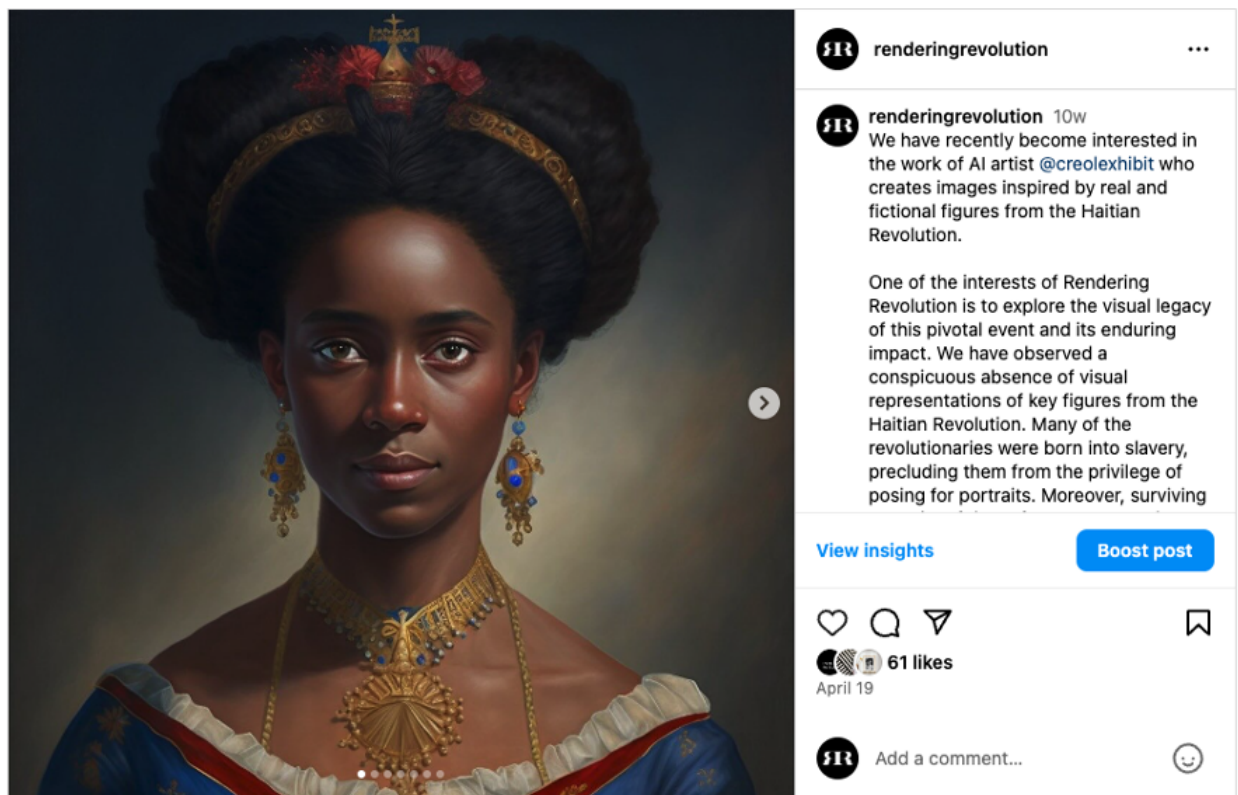


Figure 6. Screenshot of 2024 Rendering Revolution post on @creoleexhibit's AI generated art (taken June 2024).

SM: The post you mention here was so important and we received such interesting responses to it from a variety of people including artists, art historians, and curators. And you're right, as someone who works in a college of Computer Science, I do see up close where and how public discourse about AI and its technical architecture and social impact intersect. This is my personal opinion, but I am highly skeptical of generative AI as a net positive social good (it's the same way I feel about social media, really). Here, I turn to the scholarship of researchers such as Timnit Gebru, Joy Buolamwini, Ruha Benjamin, Amy J. Ko, Safiya Noble and others who have helpfully shown how computing technologies reify pre-existing social inequities. Part of the problem is epistemological — computing, mathematics, and other sciences are too often perceived as objective or neutral — as disconnected from ideology, culture, history. The myth of objectivity that continues to define the gaze and methods of scientific inquiry, including and perhaps especially in computing, is a product of white supremacy and is part of a longer history of science in the West that cannot be divorced from European colonialism. Here, I'm not absolving the humanities from similar epistemological problems, but because of computer science's close relationship to industry, we are seeing how quickly and powerfully the products of this field can enter and directly impact human society and our natural environment. I just finished reading the excellent piece "Provocations from the Humanities for Generative AI Research" [Klein et al. 2025] on how including, and perhaps even centering, humanities perspectives on AI development and use is critical for sustainable and ethical technological futures. This article gave me hope, particularly as a humanist working in a STEM space where I sometimes feel like my training and expertise are not as valued as my colleagues who have CS, Math, or Engineering degrees (I am a proud holder of a PhD in Comparative Literature). I guess, in short, my current perspective is that we need to be skeptical of generative AI and, if we are discussing or using it in our classrooms, I think it is important to make clear to students the ethical considerations of the technology in a way that does not necessarily center plagiarism (as I've seen be the dominant framework through which educators are discussing gen-AI), but rather that focuses on the ethics of the development of genAI itself — the data it was trained on, the carbon footprint of training a tool on increasingly large data sets, the vision and priorities of investors in major AI companies such as Google, the outsourcing of data labeling to underpaid workers in the global south... the list goes on. I agree with Klein et al. in their assertion that this is a time in which we really need strong and equitable interdisciplinary partnerships, particularly between the humanities and

Looking ahead & privileging the material

To conclude this conversation on this note of interdisciplinarity, we are delighted to share that *Rendering Revolution* has inspired a brick-and-mortar exhibition titled *Revolisyon toupatou* that we mounted at Parsons School of Design at the beginning of 2025 (figures 7-10). We hope that our collaboration on this exhibition will provide an example for other faculty to reach out to one another, particularly across disciplines and across university affiliations, to engage in research that energizes them. We are particularly interested in creating new networks with other early-career faculty in the Humanities and STEM fields who are seeking alternative models/possibilities for sharing research with communities within and outside of traditional academic spaces. The two of us plan to write about our experience curating this exhibition together (for our respective universities and for our own project website) and to offer encouragement for junior and/or contingent faculty who may still be working to find collaborators and mentors they trust and are motivated by.



Figure 7. An image from the exhibition *Revolisyon Toupatou*, featuring the library and pieces by Franck Godfrey, Michel Chataigne, and Steven Baboun. Photo Credit: Dylan Yruegas.



Figure 8. *Revolisyon Toupatou*, featuring work by Saphyra Saint Fort, Ervenotte Lassus-Harbord, The Gayo Twins, Naderson Saint Pierre, Prajjé Oscar, Frantz Farnolle, and Etant Dupain. Photo credit: Dylan Yruegas.



Figure 9. *Revolisyon Toupatou*, front window display. Featuring work by Daveed Baptiste, Stella Jean, Waïna Chancy, The Gayo Twins, Madjeen Isaac, and Stanley Wany. Photo credit: Dylan Yruegas.



Figure 10. *Revolisyon Toupatou* co-curators Jonathan Michael Square (pictured left) and Siobhan Mei (right) in front of the exhibition window display at the corner of 13th and 6th avenues at Parsons School of Design in New York.

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