

Building on the Margins: *Salt & Aloes*

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DOI: pending

Abstract

This paper examines *Salt & Aloes*, a digital humanities project founded in 2020 to explore and circulate Caribbean material culture through alternative digital spaces. Originating from a creative inquiry into a single colonial object, the planter's chair, the project challenges the silences and distortions embedded within colonial archives. *Salt & Aloes* operates as a form of fugitivity, working beyond traditional academic institutions, relying on limited resources, and sustained by vibrant networks of artists, scholars, and community members. This work illustrates the potential of digital humanities tools to reframe Caribbean histories in plural and emergent ways, while also confronting systemic barriers such as colonial legacies, funding limitations, and institutional gatekeeping. After a period of rapid growth, the project now pauses to reflect and recalibrate, focusing on deepening meaningful connections and its own limited capacity. Embracing the inherent messiness of creative work at the margins, *Salt & Aloes* models a practice of digital marronage that negotiates space alongside institutions without losing its autonomy. Ultimately, this project highlights the human and scholarly possibilities of caring, daring, and decolonial approaches to knowledge production in Caribbean digital scholarship.

Building on the Margins: *Salt & Aloes*

This work examines *Salt & Aloes*, a digital humanities project created in 2020 and dedicated to the study and circulation of Caribbean material culture. At its core, the project was developed to address the silences and distortions embedded within colonial archives by experimenting with digital platforms as alternative spaces for knowledge production. Through *Salt & Aloes*, I argue that digital humanities tools hold extraordinary potential for Caribbean scholarship, but that the development of these platforms is often limited by systemic challenges of cost, colonial infrastructure, and institutional gatekeeping. In this sense, projects like *Salt & Aloes* embody a form of fugitivity, created outside academic institutions, improvised with limited resources, and sustained through networks of creativity and community engagement. *Fugitivity* here does not signify escape alone but rather a tactical engagement with restrictive structures; finding ways to thrive at the margins of formal scholarly practice while disrupting the logics that limit a plural and emergent telling of Caribbean histories.

Salt & Aloes began with an experimental impulse, through an initial investigation of a single object: the planter's chair. During a 2011 performance at the Whim Plantation and Museum in St. Croix staged by the artist La Vaughn Belle, participants were invited to pose with a chair from the collection, an artifact whose design was historically bound to the authority of European planters and the imperial projects of the late 19th and 20th centuries. The resulting series of polaroids revealed varying tensions that this act of sitting elicited. Some poses demonstrated a comfort or willingness to take control of the object, while others revealed what read as more of a hesitation to do so. Together, the images documented each sitter's struggle or surrender to the power embedded in the chair's history. This performance articulated the ways in which material culture has mediated power and memory and ultimately became a catalyst for the creation of *Salt & Aloes*.

The study of objects and material culture in, of and from the Caribbean has historically been compromised by the

fragmentary legacies of colonization. Propagandistic Eurocentric documentation and archival practices systematically perpetuated racist ideologies, and flattened the complex, layered meanings of material objects, erasing the lived experiences that surrounded them. These practices have included the use of cataloguing systems and descriptions that reinforce epistemological violence, privileging the histories of European colonizers, and marginalizing or erasing the voices and experiences of colonized or racialized peoples. Such gaps are not merely absences but deliberate forms of suppression: a refusal to record indigenous knowledge systems, a distortion of African contributions, and an imposition of European interpretive frameworks.

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Faced with the uneven terrain of an incomplete and unreliable archive, artists, activists, and cultural practitioners have employed alternative tools, design radical systems, or themselves created speculative renderings of life (past, present, or future) to imagine and reclaim what had been lost or erased. In these efforts, digital platforms have emerged as sites of decentralized, accessible, user-centric engagement, enabling greater experimentation in meaning-making and narrative recovery. Artist Rodell Warner's use of AI exemplifies the turn toward alternative archival engagement with his series *Artificial Archive*, which employs text-to-image AI generators to critically intervene in the Caribbean photographic archive. Warner digitally colorizes and animates nineteenth-century photographs of Black and Brown Caribbean subjects, blending archival images with digital animation to challenge and subvert the colonial and anthropological narratives that have historically shaped these representations. His ongoing work raises important questions about the reliability of visual archives and invites viewers to reconsider what Caribbean history and identity might look like when reimagined through modern tools.

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Despite the possibilities of existing technology, the original iteration of *Salt & Aloes* was strikingly modest: a stream of Instagram posts featuring archival images, some descriptive text and minimal context or metadata. Though these early posts lacked extensive historical background or thoroughly rigorous research, they were fundamentally driven by critical questions around the trustworthiness of Caribbean's visual identity. What did the Caribbean truly look like? How have colonial histories shaped the recognition and representation of the region? And how do the images and objects from the past — products of colonial encounter, economic exploitation, and racialized power — filter into contemporary Caribbean visual culture and identity?

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In addition to modern images of traditional design, such as the planter's chair, some of the earliest entries for the project included photographs by American travel writer Harry A. Franck. These posed studio portraits of indentured laborers, and candid snapshots of what was purported to be everyday Caribbean life were among the digital collection held by the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. These posts were far from a traditional archive but represented the project's furtive beginnings; a curiosity, experimentation, and a purposeful refusal to presuppose an object's inherited story. In so doing, this experimentation opened a space of exploratory representation, inviting viewers to ask how Caribbean visual identities are shaped by the legacies embedded in such images. From the sixteenth century onward, Caribbean visual culture was deeply shaped by European colonial agendas. Maps, paintings, botanical illustrations, and early photographs served imperial interests by portraying tropical landscapes, enslaved and indentured laborers, and Indigenous peoples through Eurocentric and often racialized perspectives; a visual language in which Franck represented a newer generation of Western imagination. These images reinforced the structures of plantation economy, racial hierarchy, and colonial domination, functioning as ideological tools in the construction of empire.

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Yet, both within and in opposition to these dominant visual regimes, Caribbean peoples and artists have continually contested, adapted, and reimagined inherited representations. Edna Manley of Jamaica (1897–1987), Hector Hyppolite of Haiti (1894–1948), and Althea McNish of Trinidad and Tobago (1924–2020) are among the visual artists who actively challenged colonial legacies by reclaiming African diasporic heritage, integrating local cultural symbols, and redefining Caribbean identity. Beyond individual practices, artist collectives like the Caribbean Artists Movement (CAM), founded in London in 1966 and active through the early 1970s, created an inclusive forum for Caribbean writers, visual artists, and intellectuals to collectively redefine Caribbean identity and culture. CAM's efforts expanded cultural production beyond colonial narratives and forged connections between West Indian migrants and Black British communities, significantly shaping Caribbean arts and cultural discourse during a period of political and social change. More recently, digital humanists have revived the practice of crafting maps with extensive historical data beyond mere geography. This resurgence of "thick-mapping" integrates additional layers of information into contemporary network constructions,

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thereby enhancing and challenging traditional spatial and cultural representations. By embedding these interactive layers, researchers explore the nuanced conveyance of meaning through maps, highlighting how both detailed and conventional symbols can influence and reflect perceptions of the world. This methodology enables spatial historians to reexamine fundamental analytical categories such as race, gender, class, and state power, using them as lenses to study the physical and dynamic aspects of historical environments. A notable example of this approach is Vincent Brown's work on visualizing and analyzing slave revolts in Jamaica during the early modern Atlantic period [Brown 2015, 134–141].

The early *Salt & Aloes* posts, though admittedly clumsy and undefined, offered a provisional gesture within a modern decolonial project. What would emerge over time, and through much trial and error, was a reorientation toward the multiple, evolving visualities through which Caribbean identity is produced and experienced. Eventually, the language included with the images began to invite reflection on the colonial ways of seeing that remain codified in contemporary culture and challenged viewers to imagine the Caribbean as a site of ongoing cultural production rather than fixed stereotype or object of colonial display. This approach is aligned with important and emerging efforts both practical and theoretical that seek to decolonize Caribbean archives by embracing multi-vocal, situated histories marked by complexity, fragmentation, and emergent narratives. In advocating for archival justice scholars Hazel V. Carby calls for archives themselves to acknowledge alternative modes of knowledge production and representation that go beyond written documents to include embodied memory, ritual, and vernacular histories, essential for communities historically excluded from official narratives. Tina Campt's work on refusal and visual captivity further adds to these challenges to traditional archival practices by arguing for affective and embodied engagements with materials, urging that archives be sites of contested engagement and ethical negotiation. This emphasis on the "messiness" of this work, the transparency, vulnerability, and openness to correction, became an essential point of growth for *Salt & Aloes* as the project embarked on the experimental work of remixing and reassembling archival materials through digital methodologies. Aljoe and Elizabeth Maddock Dillon's *Early Caribbean Digital Archive (ECDA)* exists as an example of an open-access resource for early Caribbean materials which, importantly, "engages specific modes of remixing that characterize contemporary Caribbean art and music to present the material anew" [Sinanan 2023, 153–156]. Rather than resisting this messiness, this work centers on iterative, non-linear modes of knowledge production that embrace fragmentation and multiplicity, promoting participatory and equitable archival practices.

Building on this experimental and iterative approach, initiatives such as the *Caribbean Memory Project* similarly work to empower diasporic communities in documenting and preserving their own histories through oral storytelling, family archives, and public dialogue. These efforts reposition archival authority away from colonial state and institutional control toward community-rooted custodianship. In parallel, the Jamaica Memory Bank has expanded archival practices by incorporating audiovisual collections and community-curated exhibitions, further emphasizing participatory and decentralized models of cultural preservation. Together, these theoretical frameworks and practical projects compel archival practice in the Caribbean to move beyond static repositories and toward dynamic, participatory, and decolonial spaces, offering useful models for projects like *Salt & Aloes* that foreground plurality, situatedness, and continuous re-imagination within Caribbean histories.

Still, throughout the life of this project, *Salt & Aloes* has been shaped by significant structural barriers that limit Caribbean scholars' use of digital humanities tools and training. Grassroots digital projects like this frequently embody "people-first" approaches valuing relationality, human-centered production, and iterative collaboration rather than polished products or institutional metrics, yet these models struggle for recognition and financial sustainability [Meneses and Furato 2020, 5]. As described by Marisa Parham in her discussion of digital humanities discovery, the challenges inhibiting visibility, sustained funding, and institutional support for digital scholarship are compounded in and for marginalized regions and where social infrastructure for DH remains emergent [Meneses and Furato 2020, 333].

Within this, alternative projects like *Salt & Aloes* exist as acts of digital marronage; employing a kind of creative survival and insurgency amid precarity. Emerging entities such as the Digital Caribbean Research Institute seek to build regional capacity despite persistent funding instability and tensions between global platform standards and local epistemologies. Similarly, the Caribbean Digital Scholarship Summer Institute (CDSsi) represents a partial but important intervention in centering Caribbean contexts within digital training and scholarship. For participants of this program, myself included,

the institute underscored how pedagogical practices in digital humanities must thoughtfully reckon with the constraints and possibilities intrinsic to postcolonial realities. Unlike many traditional digital humanities programs that often presume uninterrupted access to infrastructure and standardized norms, the CDSsi recognized the complex landscape where Caribbean scholars navigate funding precarity, technological scarcity, linguistic diversity, and diasporic dispersal. Fugitivity as an analytic and praxis may be expressed as independent, community-driven projects precisely because they strategically slip through institutional cracks, leveraging provisional digital platforms and collaborative networks to imagine and enact more liberatory modalities of archiving, mapping, and storytelling.

On Caribbean Imagination

Throughout Caribbean history, refusal by colonial and imperial authorities to imagine Black agency and resistance, a prime example of which being French leadership's blindness on the eve of the Haitian Revolution ([Trouillot 1995, 95–107]), has been echoed in the skepticism that met the epistemic challenges of decolonial movements in the twentieth century [Moyo 2020, 75]. These systematic modes of denial have forced Caribbean communities and thinkers to continually seek fugitive paths: ways of surviving and creating outside of sanctioned, monitored spaces and dominant narratives. Stefano Harney and Fred Moten conceptualize fugitivity as the radical act of “being together in homelessness,” that is, claiming community not on the terms of the institution but through practices of wilful misfit and creative re-inscription [Moten and Harney 2013, 8]. *Salt & A/oes* began its work making visible the agency and imagination systematically erased or overlooked, and in the explorations on the digital margins where alternate visions are possible. It was built through platformed conversations between artist La Vaughn Belle and art historian Samantha Noel, as well as between Jessica Marie Johnson, a historian specializing in Black life, slavery, and digital humanities, and Trinidadian poet and critic Shivanee Ramlochan. It continued to establish itself through a broadening range of initiatives: deep-dive essays on Caribbean material culture; an extensive object archive and searchable database documenting regional artifacts; public syllabi featuring diverse resources on Caribbean art, design, and history; profiles of makers and inventors; a Caribbean artist directory; and a series of open-access events and community-curated dialogues that foreground lived experience and critical inquiry. These multifaceted approaches positioned the project as a developing platform for rethinking the significance, use, and future of Caribbean things, while connecting creators and audiences across disciplines and geographies.

Operating *Salt & A/oes* as an independent, fugitive project has granted the work a significant creative freedom while obliging continual, reflexive negotiation with questions of ethics, access, and the politics of curation. This continuous dialogue echoes what Saidiya Hartman calls “critical fabulation” — the practice of reconstructing what is missing or silenced in the archive through imagination and empathetic speculation [Hartman 2008, 3–4]. My own editorial control enabled personalization in cataloging contemporary Caribbean artists but also required grappling with who is afforded legitimacy, which bodies of work are rendered visible, and on what terms. Instead of imposing exhaustive definitions of “Caribbean artist,” *Salt & A/oes* adopted transparent, evolving criteria — reflecting the reality that positionality, diaspora, and subjectivity are inherently fugitive and relational. This dialogue around who and what constitutes “Caribbean art” mirrors the very questions Josephs and Risam raise in revisiting Paul Gilroy's Black Atlantic — that digital projects simultaneously decenter and remap cultural identity, disrupting colonial periodization and nation-state logics by foregrounding movement, overlap, and translation. Digital humanities, as practiced from the Caribbean, demand approaches that refuse the universalizing, monolingual tendencies of dominant academic platforms. In *Salt & A/oes*, this has meant holding open the boundaries between criticism and creation, archive and artistic improvisation, to support a “pluriverse” of Caribbean expression. The concept of the pluriverse, as theorized in decolonial theory, considers the coexistence of multiple, ontologically distinct worlds or realities rather than a single universal world. It directly challenges the universalizing tendency of Western modernity that assumes one global reality knowable through dominant epistemologies. Instead, the pluriverse acknowledges irreducible differences in ways of knowing and being, emphasizing that these multiple worlds can coexist without being subsumed under a single dominant narrative [Mignolo and Mignolo 2022, xix–xxii].

Digital archives concerned with Caribbean and Black Atlantic histories are not panaceas; rather, they are generative yet always incomplete sites of ongoing struggle, mirroring what Black studies, feminist, and decolonial theorists frame as fugitive knowledge-making. Projects such as the *Fugitive Barbados Mapping Project* attempt to reconstruct the possible

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journeys of enslaved people who escaped bondage by mapping speculated origins, destinations, and kinship connections based on fragments from runaway ads in the Barbados Mercury (1762–1848). This project, like Saidiya Hartman’s notion of critical fabulation, acknowledges that filling archival gaps may be impossible yet insists on the necessity of imaginative act and repair, tracing what may never be fully recovered. Similarly, *Mapping Marronage* confronts the limitations of the historical record, missing names or intentions — and invites users to “imagine ourselves running with them, tracing routes of refuge and pathways to freedom within a tragic world of captivity and coercion,” making visible the irreducible gaps, silences, and unfinished work intrinsic to fugitive lives (*Mapping Marronage*). The *Fugitive Caribbean Project* further leverages public participation, blending creative responses and careful transcription of fugitive slave ads, so that users become co-archivists as well as speculative world-builders, responding to absences in the record by reframing them into opportunities for communal engagement and contemporary meaning-making. These examples embody the ethos that digital archives for the Caribbean do not aim to definitively solve the historical absences of colonial violence, but rather keep open the possibility of alternative futures through creative, reparative, and always-incomplete acts of fugitive curation and narrative formation.

On the Margins

The digital public sphere’s structural dominance by Western and white voices creates conditions of marginalization not simply by exclusion but through deeply embedded technological racism, as Ruha Benjamin’s theory of “coded exposure” illustrates [Benjamin 2019, 99–120]. Yet, operating from the margin is not only a site of constraint but also a space of critical creative production and political intervention. Walter Rodney’s conception of the “guerrilla intellectual” [Kelley 2018, 7–14] and Harney and Moten’s Undercommons locate such practices as forms of refuge and sabotage within and beyond institutional limits, foregrounding collective, subversive modes of enactment. *Salt & Aloes* embraces this fugitive positionality, viewing digital space as a site of marronage, a dynamic experience of creative flight and liberation inspired by Maroon societies; multipart, relational, and defiant of colonial and digital logics.

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David Joselit’s theory of the aesthetics of globalism offers a crucial lens for understanding how marginal digital projects like *Salt & Aloes* engage with global cultural circulation in ways that disrupt traditional center-periphery binaries. In it, Joselit argues that the value of contemporary art no longer stems from fixed geographic or cultural origins but from saturation — its capacity to be “everywhere at once” through dense networks of image circulation and connectivity [Joselit 2020, 16]. This saturation does not dissolve difference; rather, it cultivates space for diversified aesthetic idioms where peripheral and marginalized artistic practices actively reimagine, reframe, and repurpose heritage through ongoing dialogues with global circuits. Joselit further contends that this deregulation challenges museum and institutional dominance over meaning by enabling what he terms “authorization”, a provisional and situational recognition across multiple contexts and audiences [Joselit 2020, 243]. Mapping *Salt & Aloes* onto this framework, its fugitive arcs emerge not only as modes of resistance but as forms of global networked creation: acts originating from the margin that resonate broadly and demand new, imaginative geographies of cultural production.

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Theories of refusal and dis/engagement further illuminate how such creative acts operate; for instance, Amponsah’s concept of Black dis/engagement repositions strategic withdrawal from hostile digital spaces as creative refusal, making room for emergent, autonomous forms of presence and community outside dominant frameworks. Similarly, returning to Tina Campt’s insights on visual captivity and affective refusal draws attention to the nuanced ways in which marginalized communities negotiate representation, caregiving, and self-determination beyond how visibility is traditionally conceived. These modes of dis/engagement resist invisibility but rather, mark critical counterpublic. These alternative or oppositional spaces are typically formed by members of marginalized or subordinated groups created in response to exclusions from mainstream publics, functioning as spaces for both withdrawal and contestation of dominant discourse, broadening the scope of public debate and bringing attention to issues, values, and experiences often suppressed or ignored by hegemonic publics [Fraser 1992, 67]. Though not inherently progressive, just or egalitarian; their existence can enhance democratic discussion by making public life more pluralistic. In this light, *Salt & Aloes* is one of many projects that exist as a nuanced digital experiment at the margins, one that both acknowledges the entrenched limitations it confronts and enacts a fugitive, networked globalism that refuses to be confined. It operates as a place of disappearance and reappearance, refusal and creation, crafting a Caribbean digital archive and discourse that is relational, mobile, and generative within global aesthetic flows. This repositioning from margin to critical site of

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creative intervention emphasizes the political stakes of digital placemaking as well as its potential for collective transformation.

Following a period of rapid and somewhat chaotic growth, *Salt & Aloes* currently sits at a moment of pause and strategic reconfiguration. This hiatus has provided vital space to reassess the project's resources, scope, and impact, especially in light of limited capacity as a single-creator initiative without institutional funding or nonprofit status. Despite consistent effort, newsletter engagement plateaued, and without income, it was impossible to pay contributors or build a broader editorial team. Though independent, the project opened doors to significant opportunities in academic and cultural forums, including partnerships with the University of Miami's Center for Global Black Studies, participation in the Still Here symposium, and presentations at Black Portraiture[s] VII: Play and Performance (The Marion Thompson Wright Lecture Series). These engagements affirm the project's relevance in scholarly and artistic conversations even as practical challenges remain palpable.

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Discussions at the ART PAPERS symposium in Atlanta (September 2025) resonated strongly with *Salt & Aloes'* trajectory and current stasis. Panelists Tempestt Hazel (*Sixty Inches from Center*), James Hoff (*Primary Information*), and Lindsay Preston Zappas (*Carla*) emphasized embracing "messiness" as inherent to creation and relationships, advocating for responsive systems that accommodate complexity rather than simplify it. They underscored the importance of a human-centered, producer-focused model that prioritizes care, shared values, and sustainable collaboration over product or growth metrics alone. Critically, they proposed shifting from mission-driven to values-driven frameworks as a path toward self-dissolution of the necessity for such projects — imagining a future where the conditions that make the work urgent no longer exist.

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This reframing holds the potential to shape the future of *Salt & Aloes* significantly: the effort being not to expand endlessly but to deepen connections within its core audience of Caribbean art workers, scholars, and cultural producers for whom this work holds intrinsic meaning. In doing so, it models a digital marronage that neither rejects nor fully assimilates to institutional structures but negotiates space alongside them, filtering opportunities and cultivating networks aligned with regional priorities and ethical imperatives. The project's ongoing challenge, however, is balancing autonomy with sustainability. Being a one-person operation constrains content production capacity and risks a narrowing of scope that may not fully reflect the rich plurality of Caribbean artistic practices and identities. Yet this tension itself is emblematic of the margins as critical creative spaces: messy, contested, and ultimately generative. *Salt & Aloes* embraces this condition not as a deficit but as a space for relational, values-based experimentation at the heart of its continuing evolution.

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