

The History of Black Writing Novel Corpus¹: Digitization, Infrastructure, and Collocation as Social Practice²

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Within literary archives in the United States, gatekeeping practices have restricted the full inclusion of Black writers. Exclusionary practices directed at people of African descent establish and enforce barriers to full participation in intellectual spaces, including the archive. Black archives, and Black digital archives in particular, serve important political purposes by laying claim to a space that preserves knowledge while also acting as points of access that index future possibilities.³ Archives are built, sometimes with power and vast resources, and sometimes piece by piece with care. The collections within an archive reflect a series of power imbued choices that are shaped by cultural values and beliefs about meaning and significance. Archives function as spaces that house collections, and, those collections are formed within a network of practices designed to include or omit, and they can also work to constrain the boundaries of the cannon. Systemic global racialization seeks to erase Black experiences, and, as a scholarly tradition, Black studies seeks to restore the humanity of Black people (Gallon: 2016). The Black digital humanities contribute to these restoration efforts through engaging tools and methods for the preservation of texts that can be hard to locate or that have been alienated from the cannon. Within this context, creating and inhabiting the space of the archive becomes a political act and a protective response against erasure. Both digital and physical archives take up space and require maintenance, each in their own way. This article considers how using a full-text search and retrieval tool, PhiloLogic, to navigate the space of a Black digital archive can effectively locate trends and draw attention to African

American writers who have collectively and individually impacted literary studies.

In order to preserve and disseminate collections related to Black literature, culture, and history, scholars have developed projects focused on the digital accessibility of African American voices in literature and print culture, including databases and datasets from text-mining projects. A growing number of Black digital humanities projects by small teams of scholars use information gathered from datasets and existing archives to create data visualization projects that offer new ways of understanding the Black experience.⁴ Earhart, in her article for the Debates on the Digital Humanities, reflects on the potential of the world wide web in its ability to create new canons through the proliferation of small-scale recovery projects by individual or small groups of scholars (Earhart: 2011). While she observes that many of these early projects have been displaced or lost over time, some have been able to survive and even grow into something larger. In order for these new canons to continue to grow, Earhart argues that as digital humanists “if we do not theorize our technological approaches with a mind toward cultural constructions, we will continue to exclude certain materials from digitization” (Earhart: 2011).

The Project on the History of Black Writing (HBW) at the University of Kansas, a research unit led by Dr. Maryemma Graham, archives Black texts, and their digitalization program preserves the work of African American novelists. Since its founding in 1983, HBW’s mission has been to catalog literary texts by African American writers, to increase awareness about the writers, and to encourage engagement with these texts through teaching and research. Their mission focuses on conducting data driven research on Black authorship, linking digital technology with discussions of race, and building a more informed community. Through a collaboration with the University of Chicago Textual Optics Lab, the physical archive is currently transitioning to a digital format. Currently, 891 of the over 1,000 novels in the HBW collection have been digitized and added to the Novel Corpus. Moving the archive into a digital space furthers the HBW’s mission by making the texts more accessible to researchers around the world, and it

allows researchers to navigate the archive in ways not previously possible with a physical collection of books. The University of Chicago Textual Optics Lab developed a digital tool for the Novel Corpus known as PhiloLogic, which allows the text to be filtered and examined in new ways within the digital space. The tool allows users of the archive to search all the novels, which range in publication from the late 19th century to the late 20th century, in order to identify keywords, themes, or topics of interest. Trends and patterns can be identified across literary works from the same author or from authors across different generations and locations.

Lauren Klein, in her article on quantitative literary studies in the PMLA special issue *Varieties of Digital Humanities*, argues for a methodological framework that goes beyond the axis of distant and close to include the refraction of multiple perspectives (Klein: 2020). Like a microscope that uses multiple lenses to refract light in order to navigate multiple scales, the PhiloLogic search tool can be used to view and analyze the novels from different perspectives. The PhiloLogic tool allows for close and distant readings within the corpus, which illuminates trends related to how often and in what contexts certain words or phrases appear over a given time period in the corpus.

The two formats in which each novel is stored in the Black Book Interactive Project (BBIP) digital archive facilitate the practice of close and distant reading. Each novel is scanned as a PDF file to archive how it was originally published, and then an OCR scan is performed of the novel to strip all formatting to convert it into a plain text file. These two representations of the book allow researchers to examine the overall text by running key term searches that highlight larger patterns in a single novel or across multiple novels or authors, and then moving in for a closed reading of the PDF image of the book.

the South. There were many paths in the life of young Maggie. Some led to adventure and some to a feeling of dreaded things. But through it all, her childhood was a happy one. These happy times were so imbedded in her memories that there was nothing in this life that could rend a part of this feeling from her.

Of the many arguments between Maggie's father and Bossie, one in particular stood out clearly in Maggie's memory. Cousin Bossie had arrived the night before on the *Midnight Special*. Bossie was the Jim Dandy of the Dabney clan. He was well-educated in book knowledge and many other things besides. He had a glib tongue, a bottomless stomach, and was sly by nature. According to Ollie, Bossie was forever poaching on the numerous kinfolks who lived on big farms in the southern part of Virginia. Even though Maggie was around the age of eight of nine years at the time, that day was still clear in her mind.

There they sat, cousin Bossie and Maggie's father, on the back porch (screened to keep out the flies, cats, and without success, the cunning Blue). They were sharing a huge watermelon (which to an outsider would seem an almost total waste, but there was an abundance of these melons growing in the sandy lot near the meadow; and the remains were fed the pigs). Juice and seeds were flyings and so were the tongues of the thoroughly aroused cousins. Bossie was forever harping on the subject of the status of the poor Negro in the South. He would say, "You poor colored folks are just Uncle Toms, so contented with your miserable state."

"Then you should have gone with Marcus Garvey," Maggie's pop was saying. "My philosophy of life is to tread all highways with a light step, make no loud noise. Never pause to rest in the middle of the road and reflect on how rough the going has been. Your journey through life will be much smoother if you can cast aside the feeling of injustice which you believe was felt by your forefathers. It is hard to fight a battle, unless you share in it. My belief is to do good and expect little in return and when your demands on life are few, then you'll have fewer disappointments." Bossie was a little awed at what he thought was pretty good philosophy for a colored farmer who had never attended high school. Then Maggie's father added, "Let sleeping dogs lie." "Not me," said the irate Bossie. "I'm going to stir up all the dogs with this heated announcement." Bossie stepped back onto the tail of ole Blue, the sleeping hound (who had crept into the screened porch to escape flies). Then calamity broke loose. Blue was yelling more from surprise than injury. Bossie was stammering from excitement and fear. Fear because the hound had shown his teeth at him. "Bossie, don't touch that dog," said Maggie's father as he saw Bossie eyeing the broom in the corner of the porch. Maggie's mother hurried from the kitchen because of the uproar and as she got an eyeful of the rumpus, she hastened to the front porch. "Maggie, go into the parlor and play 'Under the Double Eagle.' " The reluctant Maggie left the corner of the shady porch where she and Lou were playing jacks and went obediently into the cool dark parlor. The room smelled of tobacco and mothballs. Maggie pumped away with little effort on the pedals of the player piano, from the music roll of the "Double Eagle" she went into the music of "Old Folks at Home." "My, my," said Bossie as he entered the parlor, "we certainly do have a lot of dedicated Toms around here." He seated his slight frame on the settee appearing rather care about his bout with Blue. Bossie, being a musical rascal, began to hum the song and keep time with the toe of his shoe. Maggie finished her job of mastering the great

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roots of some leaning willows in the airy and shady meadow. This creek Ollie would call a hog wallow whenever he got disgusted with its lack of greatness. So many paths that led to many exciting places: to wild strawberry patches and boiling springs that seemed to erupt from under the many rocks and emptied into little rills. Paths that led to dense woodland, through pines and oaks that seemed to whisper of unseen things. Paths that led to Grandpa Ruffin's house through a clay-lined gorge without a sprig of vegetation. Paths that led to the railroad and one could place her ear to the cold steel rail of the track and detect the rumble of oncoming trains many miles away. Paths that led to two bridges that spanned the creek for one of the main highways of the South. There were many paths in the life of young Maggie. Some led to adventure and some to a feeling of dreaded things. But through it all, her childhood was a happy one. These happy times were so imbedded in her memories that there was nothing in this life that could rend a part of this feeling from her. Of the many arguments between Maggie's father and Bossie, one in particular stood out clearly in Maggie's memory. Cousin Bossie had arrived the night before on the *Midnight Special*. Bossie was the Jim Dandy of the Dabney clan. He was well-educated in book knowledge and many other things besides. He had a glib tongue, a bottomless stomach, and was sly by nature. According to Ollie, Bossie was forever poaching on the numerous kinfolks who lived on big farms in the southern part of Virginia. Even though Maggie was around the age of eight of nine years at the time, that day was still clear in her mind. There they sat, cousin Bossie and Maggie's father, on the back porch (screened to keep out the flies, cats, and without success, the cunning Blue). They were sharing a huge watermelon (which to an outsider would seem an almost total waste, but there was an abundance of these melons growing in the sandy lot near the meadow; and the remains were fed the pigs). Juice and seeds were flyings and so were the tongues of the thoroughly aroused cousins. Bossie was forever harping on the subject of the status of the poor Negro in the South. He would say, "You poor colored folks are just Uncle Toms, so contented with your miserable state." "Then you should have gone with Marcus Garvey," Maggie's pop was saying. "My philosophy of life is to tread all highways with a light step, make no loud noise. Never pause to rest in the middle of the road and reflect on how rough the going has been. Your journey through life will be much smoother if you can cast aside the feeling of injustice which you believe was felt by your forefathers. It is hard to fight a battle, unless you share in it. My belief is to do good and expect little in return and when your demands on life are few, then you'll have fewer disappointments." Bossie was a little awed at what he thought was pretty good philosophy for a colored farmer who had never attended high school. Then Maggie's father added, "Let sleeping dogs lie." "Not me," said the irate Bossie. "I'm going to stir up all the dogs with this heated announcement." Bossie stepped back onto the tail of ole Blue, the sleeping hound (who had crept into the screened porch to escape flies). Then calamity broke loose. Blue was yelling more from surprise than injury. Bossie was stammering from excitement and fear. Fear because the hound had shown his teeth at him. "Bossie, don't touch that dog," said Maggie's father as he saw Bossie eyeing the broom in the corner of the porch. Maggie's mother hurried from the kitchen because of the uproar and as she got an eyeful of the rumpus, she hastened to the front porch. "Maggie, go into the parlor and play 'Under the Double Eagle.' " The reluctant Maggie left the corner of the shady porch where she and Lou were playing jacks and went obediently into the cool dark parlor. The room smelled of tobacco and mothballs. Maggie pumped away with little effort on the pedals of the player piano, from the music roll of the "Double Eagle" she went into the music of "Old Folks at Home." "My, my," said Bossie as he entered the parlor, "we certainly do have a lot of dedicated Toms around here." He seated his slight frame on the settee appearing rather care about his bout with Blue. Bossie, being a musical rascal, began to hum the song and keep time with the toe of his shoe. Maggie finished her job of mastering the great

Using methods for key term development and text mining, we entered the archive interested in finding novels that dealt with the notion of space and how it is represented in African American literature. Initially we conducted general searches to see how often the word or related words appeared in the corpus. We started out with the idea of the porch and related terms. While our initial keyword searches used the word "porch," we realized the results were limited to textual passages that only contained that specific word. Since the Corpus contained novels from a wide time range (late 19th century to the late 20th century), from regions all over the United States, and with dialogues that reflected the registers of specific Black communities, we had to take into consideration that the same word may have slightly different spellings as well as compound forms of the word. The PhiloLogic tool has powerful search functions, including a feature known as the approximate word filter that allows the user to search for other words similar to the original keyword term. In the case of our project, we could filter our searches to include words that were an approximate match to the word "porch" by up to 70%, 80%, or 90%. The lower the approximate match percentage, the more search results would appear from the archive. However, we learned we had to adjust the percentage filter in order to find the optimal number since search

results at lower numbers like 70% might include terms that have no relation to the word “porch.” The approximate word filter allowed us to find additional terms like porches, porch steps, front porch, etc. that tied back to the main keyword of porch, which combined had 2284 occurrences in the entire database. Expanding our search this way in relation to the word porch allowed us to find even more textual passages within the corpus that included references to this space, thereby providing additional insight into a diverse range of representations of African American culture.

We also focused our key term searches on variations of the word porch, including related words like fence, gate, stoop, and steps. We were looking for terms to do with space. However, words can have multiple meanings, which the PhiloLogic allowed us to identify quickly through search results that listed together all the excerpts from the novels with the same highlighted keyword. For example, the word stoop was used not only as a noun for the entryway space located at the front of a house, but also used as a verb (the person stooped to the side). Having all the textual passages collated together facilitated our ability to read through each one and decide if we wanted to look beyond the short excerpt. This allowed us to find several passages from different novels where activities tied to the stoop reflect a more urban environment, including young men hanging out on the stoop and references to polluted or criminal activities on or near the stoop (smoking, drinking, prostitution). PhiloLogic contains other features that go beyond keyword searches that can provide additional context. A user can filter terms based on time, including how often they appear in novels during certain decades or specific time ranges. We learned that the stoop appears frequently in the novels beginning in the 1920s. Used in tandem, these different filters can provide a researcher with several perspectives of the same topic, thereby offering multiple ways on how their project may develop.

Once our initial searches led us to focus on the porch, we wanted to gain a deeper understanding of the social significance of this space. PhiloLogic’s collocation filter searches for a series of words that co-occur with each other within the same textual passage. This allowed us to travel the data set in search of co-occurring activities in relation to the porch. By searching for terms that work together

to narrate a story about lived experiences, it is possible to pinpoint contextual connections and spatialized representations of African American culture. For example, we looked at the social nature of the porch and the way that it provides a setting for common activities: conversing with friends and family, hosting, joking, meals, snacks, holiday celebrations, domestic labor, commerce.

After finding all these instances of the word porch and its approximations within the corpus, we wanted to see if we could identify any larger trends to do with when or how this term is being used by writers. The targeting and filtered searches available in PhiloLogic allow the researcher to pinpoint passages from specific novels in the database related to the keywords entered, thereby identifying thematic patterns shared between certain writers or novels. The ability to refract passages and key terms within a text and across texts makes the infrastructure of a piece of writing and the common structures across bodies of writing easier to identify. In thinking about infrastructure within the corpus, we considered both linguistic practices, such as ways of speaking, storytelling and word usage, and cultural elements, systems of belief, material culture, and social practices. We weren't initially looking for Black women writers for this project, but we realized through these targeted searches in the corpus that a good number of the novels with frequent references to the term porch were women writers. After we started to narrow our parameters, we looked at how the term porch was being used in select passages of the novels we had selected for our case study. This connection made us then consider how are these writers in the corpus part of a larger tradition of African American women writers who use fiction to document Black life taking place in spaces like the porch. Using meta-categories, we began key term development with general searches related to spaces. After locating novels within a pattern, we examined the social context and identified connections within a set of texts. The following chart provides excerpts from the novels by Black women writers from the US south. The passages are organized by themes, and the keyword "porch" is highlighted in each text to reiterate the pattern that connects the novels:

Commerce and Foodways

<p>Author: Katheryn Campbell Graham Novel: <i>Under the Cottonwood: A Saga of Negro life</i> (1941) 38 references to porch</p>	<p>About two o'clock in the afternoon, Mr. Long, a little black spindle-headed man, would walk from one side of the porch to the other, throw his head back, cover one side of his mouth with his slim hand, and shout about his wares. Soon he had a crowd; they liked to hear him say, «Hyer's yo' spare-ribs and Kansas City sawshits, hoghocks, and black eyed peas,—hot stage planks—right hyer.” The children in the neighborhood tried to have a nickel to buy a large hot ginger cookie (stage-plank).</p>
<p>Author: Mary Drummond Novel: <i>Come Go with Me: High Rock and Spring Bank</i> (1973) 37 references to porch</p>	<p>Even though Maggie was around the age of eight or nine years at the time, that day was still clear in her mind. There they sat, cousin Bosse and Maggie's father, on the back porch (screened to keep out the flies, cats, and without success, the cunning Blue). They were sharing a huge watermelon (which to an outsider would seem an almost total waste, but there was an abundance of these melons growing in the sandy lot near the meadow; and the remains were fed the pigs). Juice and seeds were flying and so were the tongues of the thoroughly aroused cousins. Bosse was forever harping on the subject of the status of the poor Negro in the South. He would say, “You poor colored folks are just Uncle Toms, so contented with your miserable state.” “Then you should have gone with Marcus Garvey,” Maggie's pop was saying.</p>
<p>Author: Linda Brown Brag Novel: <i>Rainbow Roun Mah Shoulder</i> (1983) 24 instances of porch</p>	<p>Mama and Miss Florice, on the front porch starin' into the dark. Screens made it easy to hear. Or would have, except that Trudy was such a nuisance. “You know she has TB” They muffled the last word as if the porch itself contained some white-shirted authority that would punish them just for saying «TB.»</p> <p>Peaches was really broken up about “her white lady” who never said a mean word to her all the time she was workin there and who saw to it she got the best of all the kitchen leftovers.</p>

Ceremonies and Rites of Passage

<p>Author: Katheryn Campbell Graham</p> <p>Novel: <i>Under the Cottonwood: A Saga of Negro life</i> (1941)</p> <p>38 references to porch</p>	<p>Mamie did not like a big church wedding and if she had, she didn't have money enough to have one. Mr. Jacobs built an arch on the porch and put electric lights around the rim. Mrs. Jacobs, with her deft fingers, assisted by Mrs. Dalton, decorated it with white flowers and maiden hair fern. That Monday night as the victrola sent forth a marvelous voice singing «O Promise Me,» Mamie, beautifully gowned, came out of the living room door on Seth Hamon's arm and Don and his sister Rose, came through the bedroom door. They met on the porch and Rev. Hamon, Seth's father, married them with an elaborate ceremony.</p>
<p>Author: Katheryn Campbell Graham</p> <p>Novel: <i>Under the Cottonwood: A Saga of Negro life</i> (1941)</p> <p>38 references to porch</p>	<p>Uncle Jake sat on the porch in his old wicker rocker to receive sympathies and the little change the good folk dropped into his hand. When the pall bearers brought the casket out of the house to put it into the hearse, the men stopped on the porch for Uncle Jake to see the last of his baby—the first of his eight children to die.</p>
<p>Author: Narena Easterling's</p> <p>Novel: <i>Louisiana Lady</i> (1941)</p> <p>35 references to porch</p>	<p>But tonight there was the movement of people within, without—that air of tense expectancy peculiar to a small country home when death hovers over it. Judy stopped a moment in the yard, dreading to enter. On the narrow front porch, Alebon's father and his friends sat about awkwardly, conversing in low tones.</p>
<p>Author: Mattie Virginia Harris</p> <p>Novel: <i>Weddin' Trimmin's</i> (1949)</p> <p>60 references to porch</p>	<p>It seemed, as they walked into the little white manse, that it wasn't she and Alonza, but a couple she had read about in a book, going arm in arm up to the porch, with the preacher and his wife coming to meet them. Reverend Morgan talked with them for a few minutes, and before she knew it, she was answering, "I will" to her marriage vows.</p>

Author: Mary Drummond Novel: <i>Come Go with Me: High Rock and Spring Bank</i> (1973) 37 references to porch	This final and lasting conversation of father to son revived Cad's memory as he sat on the porch of his birthplace. There was sadness around the place that day. Dolly had been laid to rest that early spring afternoon.
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We identified novels that represented the porch as a liminal space for ceremonies, rites of passage, commerce, and foodways. The novels highlight how the porch functions as a locus of commerce and foodways, and it shows how the porch is transformed into a public venue where local residents come to purchase goods. The novels also provide examples of ceremonies and rites of passage, including scenes of marriages and funerals that take place on the porch, which reiterates how African American literature effectively documents the importance of the porch in being a space that foments communal practices tied to African American culture.

Kim Gallon has characterized the foundational work of the Black digital humanities as restoring Black communities' humanity through the recovery, preservation and dissemination of texts related to the Black experience. The History of Black Writing Novel Corpus fulfills these three tenants through the OCR and PDF scanning of African American novels from the 19th century to the present (recovery), creating a digital repository for these texts using the PhiloLogic database (preservation), and providing access to this digital archive for researchers in order to produce new scholarship and DH projects related to African American literature (dissemination). PhiloLogic serves as a rich tool for navigating the archive to identify the work of writers focused on similar trends and comparative literary studies based on specific time periods that could be generated using these tools and methods.

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Notes

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- 2 Acknowledgements: This project is possible due to the support of the inter-institutional program, Black Book Interactive Project (BBIP), which was founded by the History of Black Writing at the University of Kansas. The 2019-2020 BBIP-ER Scholars Program, and its collaborative community of socially engaged researchers, provided us with a social and intellectual space to develop this paper.
- 3 For more information on US-based libraries with large digital collections on the Black experience, see the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture’s Digital Schomburg site, the University of Southern Mississippi Libraries’ Civil Rights in Mississippi Digital Archive, and The Colored Conventions Project developed at the University of Delaware.
- 4 For more information on African American literature datasets, see the *African American Review* dataset on trends in African American literary studies (Brooks et al.: 2016), and the Black Short Story Data Set on short stories published from 1925 to 2017 (Ramsy et al.: 2018). For Black digital humanities data visualization projects related to space, see the Scalar site *Lost in the City: An Exploration of Edward P. Jones's Short Fiction* (Ramsy and Ossom-Williamson: 2019) and the web project Baldwin’s Paris, a spatial representation of James Baldwin’s references to important landmarks in Paris (Thompson: 2016). Other projects include *Virtual Harlem*, a virtual reality environment of the Harlem Renaissance (Carter: 2013) and *Visualizing Emancipation*, which identifies patterns of emancipation during the American Civil War.