

## Making a Case for the Black Digital Humanities

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The dust has yet to settle around the debates over what the digital humanities is or is not. Boundaries and demarcations continue to shift within a complex and ongoing conversation about the intersection of technology with humanistic fields. This context, I would argue, has generated the ideal conditions in which to engage the question of how humanity is framed in the digital humanities. To this end, I seek to articulate a relationship between the digital humanities and Africana/African American/Black studies (from here on I will call the field Black studies) so as to highlight how technology, employed in this underexamined context, can further expose humanity as a racialized social construction.

Questions may arise around the use of the term “black.” Would not “Africana” or “African American” be more appropriate, some may ask. In other contexts, I am quite sure that my addition of a racial signifier to “digital humanities” would appear at the most racist and at a minimum divisive, leading to questions about who could or could not engage in black digital humanities. Questions of this magnitude are to be expected and are in fact necessary when new areas of inquiries are proposed. At the same time, these sorts of questions obfuscate crucial complexity, making it difficult to chart the paths needed to address much deeper and systemic issues. To get caught up in exact definitions or questions of “who is in or who is out” in black digital humanities is to ignore how the very nomenclature of blackness has a complex and rich history that moves in the same conceptual orbit as the term “digital humanities” (Parham, “Without Innovation”).

Although work on racial, ethnic, and national difference emerging in the digital humanities, discussions about the lineage of Black studies within the digital humanities are almost nonexistent.<sup>1</sup> While a comprehensive history of the intersections between Black studies and the digital is sorely needed, it is outside of the scope of this chapter. Here, I seek to set in motion a discussion of the black digital humanities by drawing attention to the “technology of recovery” that undergirds black digital scholarship, showing how it fills the apertures between Black studies and digital humanities. Indeed, the black digital humanities help to unmask the racialized systems of power at work in how we understand the digital humanities as a field and utilize its associated techniques. In their work with the #transformDH collective, Alexis Lothian and Amanda Phillips have suggested that putting a name to the unnamed helps to bring a concept into existence (Lothian and Phillips, “Can Digital Humanities Mean Transformative Critique?”). Thus, this piece names the “black digital humanities” as the intersection between Black studies and digital humanities, transforming the concept into corporeal reality while lending language to the work of the black digerati in and outside of the academy.

the Black digital humanities are elusive. The Black digital humanities reflects less an actual “thing” and more of a constructed space to consider the intersections between the digital and blackness (Kirschenbaum, 51). Like race, gender, class, and sexuality—all social constructs, if you will—the digital humanities increasingly hold *real* meaning and significance in the academic universe. As Kirschenbaum has observed, there are high stakes for who is and who is not a digital humanist, and for what is or is not digital humanities, when federal grants are hard to come by and academic jobs may hinge on the term (Kirschenbaum, 54–55). Some digital humanities scholars have begun to call attention to the role that race may play in the development of digital humanities programs and centers and in the funding and recognition that particular digital humanities projects might garner (Bailey, “All the Digital Humanists Are White”). A vibrant and critical discourse from #dhpoco, #transformDH, and HAS-TAC (Humanities, Arts, Sciences, and Technology Advanced Collaboratory), among others, now serves to resist the academic hegemonies that may limit our understanding of what the digital humanities is and will be in the future. My hope is that a critical consideration of the connections between Black studies and the digital humanities will help to advance this work.

The field of Black studies is nearing its fiftieth birthday, having developed out of the civil rights and Black Nationalist movements in the late 1960s. Black studies has long been understood as the comparative study of the black cultural and social experiences under white Eurocentric systems of power in the United States, the larger African diaspora, and the African continent, after all, and these systems of power endure. Contemporary scholars such as Alexander Weheliye therefore describe “black studies as a mode of knowledge production” that “investigates processes of racialization with a particular emphasis on the shifting configurations of black life” (Weheliye, 3). He continues:

If racialization is understood not as a biological or cultural descriptor but as a conglomerate of sociopolitical relations that discipline humanity into full humans, not-quite-humans, and non-humans, then blackness designates a changing system of unequal power structures that apportion and delimit which humans can lay claim to full human status and which humans cannot. (Weheliye, 3)

Weheliye asks us to consider how Black studies might illuminate the various processes by which nonwhite subjects are systematically shut out from “the category of human as it is performed in the modern west” (Weheliye, 3). His conception of Black studies is powerful in its assertion that modern humanity cannot be dislocated from a racialized hegemony.

What does this mean for digital humanities? Following Weheliye, I would argue that any connection between humanity and the digital therefore requires an investigation into how computational processes might reinforce the notion of a humanity developed out of racializing systems, even as they foster

recovery, characterized by efforts to bring forth the full humanity of marginalized peoples through the use of digital platforms and tools.

Recovery rests at the heart of Black studies, as a scholarly tradition that seeks to restore the humanity of black people lost and stolen through systemic global racialization. It follows, then, that the project of recovering lost historical and literary texts should be foundational to the black digital humanities. It is a deeply political enterprise that seeks not simply to transform literary canons and historiography by incorporating black voices and centering an African American and African diasporic experience, though it certainly does that; black digital humanities troubles the very core of what we have come to know as the *humanities* by recovering alternate constructions of humanity that have been historically excluded from that concept. A discourse on the "politics of recovery" in the digital humanities is beginning to take shape through Amy Earhart's work. She documents a history of what she calls "DIY recovery projects" in the 1990s that sought to disrupt a canon of Eurocentric and male-authored literature. Through the lens of black digital humanities, these efforts at recovery can be understood not only as the recovery of "lost or non-canonical and difficult to locate texts," but also as the recovery of black authors' humanity (Earhart, "Can Information Be Unfettered?").

Applied as a technology in Black studies and in the lives of black people living in the digital era more generally, recovery restores black people's humanity. 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 collective humanity apparent to the world. These hashtags reveal that black people's humanity is tethered to a racial system that deems black people's lives as insignificant relative to their white counterparts. Tweets that highlight disparities in social indicators such as employment, education, housing, and healthcare between white and black people show how black people's humanity has material consequences.

In addition to Twitter, scholars and institutions (along with nonacademic users) have developed literary and historical digital recovery projects that similarly represent a search and mission for the collective recuperation of a lost peoplehood. The *Digital Schomburg*, one of the earliest black digitization projects, demonstrates the power of reclaiming black humanity by recovering nineteenth-century black female writing<sup>2</sup> and late nineteenth and early twentieth century images of people of

text mining and other quantitative digital approaches in the same numbers as other groups of literary scholars. Scholars of African American literature may view text mining as counterposed to recovery (Rambsy, "African American Literature and Digital Humanities"). The relatively small number of text mining projects among scholars of black literature is concerning, however, at a time when digital humanities work has shifted its focus to quantitative and computational approaches. But the black digital humanities can highlight the value of specific computational methods. Kenton Rambsy, Assistant Professor of African American Literature at the University of Texas at Arlington and the Project Digital Initiative Coordinator for the Project on the History of Black Writing, models this approach. Noting that mobility and place are predominant themes in African American literary expression, he uses text mining software to geo-tag the occurrence of city and other geographical landmark names in black literary expression (Rambsy, "African American Literature and Digital Humanities"). For example, text mining allows Rambsy to recover Edward P. Jones's use of cities, streets, neighborhoods, and city landmarks to reenvision forms of black humanity that are not completely circumscribed by racism ("Edward P. Jones and Literary Geo-Tagging").

Rambsy's work stresses another key point: digital recovery projects that are either led by or heavily involve black scholars are particularly impactful in how they expand what we understand the digital humanities to be and its potential for critically thinking about power. As a scholar of African descent leading the digital program of the thirty-two-year-old *Project on the History of Black Writing* (HBW)—which was founded by another black literary scholar, Maryemma Graham, with a group of African American literary scholars at an organizing meeting entitled *Computer Assisted Analysis of Black Literature* (CAABL)—Rambsy produces work that disrupts the normative and racialized framework of the digital humanities as led by white scholars.<sup>5</sup> Digital humanities projects exclusively developed by white scholars and information technology staff often reflect the racial hierarchies present in higher education. Mark Anthony Neal views the small number of black scholars in the digital humanities as an administrative issue. He observes, "When all these deans and provosts are looking around for the folks who are going to do cutting edge work, the last folks they think about are black folks" (*Left of Black*). Neal's comments touch on the unspoken assumption that African Americans are technophobes, even in the midst of the information age. The supposition that black people are averse to technological innovation is tied to the discourse of "black technophobia" that still circulates today, reproducing and reinforcing long-standing "scientific" evidence of black intellectual inferiority (Everett, 19).

From the vantage of black digital humanities, foundational assumptions about humanity, as well as about how we derive meaning about human culture in the academy, remain deeply entrenched in racialization, and the digital humanities are not exempt from this charge. Like many disciplines that study humanity, discussions about digital tools and processes are most often considerations about how majority groups use or might

pays no attention to race should be defined as the “white digital humanities,” for they are, in practice, explorations about human culture based on whiteness as an unmarked category and “standard of the real” (Gordon, 79).<sup>6</sup>

The racialization of black people’s humanity therefore poses a fundamental problem to the digital humanities as it is generally defined. Understood as the union of digital technology and the academic disciplines that study human culture, what do we do with forms of humanity excluded from or marginalized in how we study the humanities and practice the digital humanities? What are the implications of using computational approaches to theorize and draw deeper insight into a modern humanity that is *prima facie* arranged and constructed along racial lines? One of the essential features of the black digital humanities, then, is that it conceptualizes a relationship between blackness and the digital where black people’s humanity is *not* a given. The black digital humanities probes and disrupts the ontological notions that would have us accept humanity as a fixed category, an assumption that unproblematically emanates in the digital realm. The black digital humanities, then, might be defined as a digital episteme of humanity that is less tool-oriented and more invested in anatomizing the digital as both progenitor of and host to new—albeit related—forms of racialization. These forms at once attempt to abolish and to fortify a taxonomy of humanity predicated on racial hierarchies.

What, then, do the black digital humanities mean for the humanities and its relationship to digital tools? Rather than moving forward with digitizing, text mining, topic modeling, and the like, the black digital humanities would have us seriously consider the political relations and “assemblages” that have racialized the literary, philosophy, and historical texts that we study (Weheliye, 3). Digital tools and platforms should be mobilized to interrogate and disclose how the humanities are developed out of systems of power. The black digital humanities reveals how methodological approaches for studying and thinking about the category of blackness may come to bear on and transform the digital processes and tools used to study humanity. Questions pertaining to digital tool development have much broader applications, of course. Johanna Drucker, for instance, reminds us that we must use and build digital infrastructure and tools steeped in humanistic theory so that they function in ways that reflect the core values of the humanities (Drucker, 87). However the black digital humanities forces us to move backward before moving forward in thinking about tools, to first consider how the very foundation of the humanities are racialized through the privileging of Western cultural traditions. It then asks us to assess whether those tools would still be used in the same manner had they been developed to explore the texts that were and are marginalized through the racialization of the humanities. It further prompts us to ask how tool building might mirror the material realities of blackness. The black digital humanities therefore foregrounds the digital as a mutual host for racism and resistance and brings to light the “role of race as a metalanguage” that shapes the digital terrain, fostering hegemonic structures

Ultimately, the task of black digital humanities is to ask, “What aspects of the digital humanities might be made more “humanistic” if we were to look at them from the perspective of blackness?” The black digital humanities raises the question, “How can digital tools and processes such as text mining and distant reading be justified when there is so much to do in reconstructing what it means to be human?”<sup>8</sup> 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 humanists to come to terms with the contingency of digital projects. How might the sustainability of a digital project be conceptualized from a standpoint that considers humanity as a social construction and subject to change over time and place? Accordingly, the black digital humanities promotes a system of change; it is a mechanism for deregulating the tendency of technological tools, when employed in the digital humanities, to deemphasize questions about humanity itself.

Thus, I make the case for the black digital humanities in order to, as Alan Liu suggests, enlarge the field with “sociocultural meaning” (Liu, 501). Black digital humanities provides a forum for thinking through the ways that black humanity emerges, submerges, and resurfaces in the digital realm through the “racializing assemblages of subjection” (Weheliye, 2). My articulation of this union does not dismiss or marginalize other efforts working at this nexus, such as eblack studies, black code studies, and digital blackness.<sup>9</sup> They all provide compelling methods for describing how the digital comes to bear on blackness and vice versa. But there is a need for these and more theorization on the topic so that they might contribute to a larger black technocultural discourse and Internet activism. Black studies has a unique role to play in dismembering how we think about humanity and the digital humanities by extension. A black epistemology will generate questions about the relationship between the racialization of humanity and the digital as power, ultimately fostering new inquiries and deeper understandings about the human condition.

## Notes

1. For some of the scholarship on difference in the digital humanities, see <http://transformdh.org/about-transformdh/> and <https://www.hastac.org/explore/social-political-issues/race-ethnicity>.

2. [http://digital.nypl.org/schomburg/writers\\_aa19/toc.html](http://digital.nypl.org/schomburg/writers_aa19/toc.html).

3. [http://digital.nypl.org/schomburg/images\\_aa19](http://digital.nypl.org/schomburg/images_aa19).

4. <http://www.nypl.org/about/locations/schomburg/digital-schomburg>.

5. <https://hbw.ku.edu>.

6. Both Moya Bailey and Tara McPherson implicitly make this argument with their article titles: “All the Digital Humanists Are White, All the Nerds Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave” and “Why Are the Digital Humanities So White?”

7. On the “metalanguage of race,” see Higginbotham.

Philosophy.

9. <http://eblackstudies.org>;  
<http://diasporahypertext.com/2015/02/13/cfp-black-code-studies/>;  
<http://www.rutgersdigitalblackness.com>.

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