Recover and Remix:

Digital Humanities, Heritage Preservation, and Black Geographies

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This essay explores the tools, methods, theories, and possibilities of digital humanities (DH) through the lens of CPCRS' mission. Our focus is on sustaining the "sites" (real and virtual) of Black heritage related to the long Civil Rights movement by pushing back against the structural and ideological forces

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of erasure, ignorance, and forgetting. How can digital humanities support these political and scholarly efforts? What are its possibilities and limitations? As this review will show, we are optimistic about the creative, empowering, and generative potential of digital humanities to foster and sustain collaborative preservation work and push against the boundaries of how place-based heritage is or could be defined.

Over the past semester, our team has surveyed the vast field of digital humanities across its many incarnations and interpretations.[2] At the beginning of this endeavor, we sought to gather and learn from various models of equitable community-institutional partnerships, exemplars of field-defining methods and design, and uncover gaps in digital humanities scholarship and research areas. On its face, digital humanities presents a deceptively simple premise: a cross-disciplinary research field that embarks upon humanistic inquiry using a range of digital computation, design, and archival methods.[3] However, after building our database and surveying the field's literature, we realized that digital humanities poses a much more complex, generative, and promising set of resources and outcomes. Digital humanities projects encompass a vast array of missions, audiences, and aspired outcomes. From digitized archives to ArcGIS storymaps, interactive timelines to born-digital manuscripts, immersive VR renderings to video games, the possibilities of design, representation, and argument are endless.

The strongest and most innovative digital humanities projects we encountered and learned from pushed back against strict disciplinary divisions in their methods, audience, and missions. Recent theoretical and project-based work adopting a postcolonial framework, for example, prompts critical engagement with how researchers define and create knowledge.[4] This move towards a "critical digital humanities" encourages a public-serving praxis that situates activists, community members, and the experiences of everyday struggles for social justice as agents and practices of legitimate knowledge production. Where does the research and mission of CPCRS fit into this trajectory? Our core principles of democratic community engagement practice, the preservation and stewardship of under resourced and underrepresented African American heritage sites and places, and community-facing teaching curricula offer

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[2] Please explore the database of these projects on our <u>website</u>.

[3] Gold, *Debates in the Digital Humanities*; Svensson, "The Landscape of Digital Humanities."

[4] Risam, *New Digital Worlds*.

significant areas of ethical and methodological overlap with critical digital humanities.

The past, ongoing, and future work in digital humanities stretches across geographies and periodizations, disciplines and subjects, methods and theories. The diversity of approaches generates tensions over definitions and scope, but this unruliness is also an asset. Digital humanities is deeply attuned to debates within and across fields and questions and offers creators and audiences new media and tools to interrogate these tensions. The speed and scale of digital methods and media creates opportunities to reimagine the logic of the archive; to recreate historical experiences through a critical lens; and, perhaps most importantly, the possibility of decentralizing and democratizing access to knowledge production and ownership.

The long history of the Civil Rights movement is often simplified and sanitized into a narrow periodization, geography, and progression. Nearly twenty years ago, historian Jacquelyn Dowd Hall cautioned against the dangers of this facile interpretation, noting that this overemphasis on the "classical phase" (1954-1965) of the Civil Rights movement, insulated from the geopolitical context of decolonization in Africa as well as political and social coalitions forged with other social justice movements, "prevents one of the most remarkable mass movements in American history from speaking effectively to the challenges of our time."[5] A superficial reading of this "master narrative" continues to provide rhetorical cover for dangerous political mobilizations that undermine the very gains this narrative celebrates, such as the Voting Rights Act. By isolating this movement from the enduring historical context that produced it – the legacy of enslavement, Jim Crow, the Great Migrations, the unequal dividends of New Deal social democracy – public histories of the Civil Rights movement risk reproducing the structural and political values and practices of white supremacy.

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[5] Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," 1234.

Teaching and learning about the Civil Rights movement and Black heritage should be, as Hall puts it, "harder."[6] There is no easy synthesis here, no soundbite, icon, or iconic site that could capture the vast diversity and complexity of these histories. Similarly, there is no single method or approach that could successfully interpret and understand the significance of this movement. Instead, research, pedagogy, and curation must start *differently*. Our focus at CPCRS is largely centered on the practice, theory, and possibilities of historic preservation and Black cultural heritage; our mandate pushes past the designations of "great buildings" and "great man" history alike. As preservationists, our medium is place: the practices, meanings, conflicts, social groups, and memories that forge a "sense of place." In what ways can we document, interpret, contextualize, and preserve place without losing the nuance and complexity that produces it? We believe digital humanities presents a way forward. Broadly defined as the meeting grounds of humanities research and digital computing techniques and methods, digital humanities invites possibilities to collaborate, generate new questions and modes of knowledge production, and imagine a world otherwise. What follows is a series of provocations, questions, insights, and models that we hope will frame new research and programming ventures at the intersection of CPCRS's network of community partners and digital humanities.

These broad organizing themes were generated in response to our initial explorations of digital humanities practice and theory. This research was also guided by a focus on the important contributions of Black geographies to the fields of historic preservation, cultural heritage, and digital humanities. These conceptual insights, which reflexively interrogate the motivations guiding research questions, support a praxis of preservation that is decolonial, relational, and pluralistic. Our ongoing projects to preserve, restore, and celebrate the rich and complex history of the Civil Rights movement rely on maintaining and strengthening relationships with community members and

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[6] Hall, 1235.

activists. Students, faculty, and professionals may bring their technical expertise to bear on supporting these efforts, but each project's directions and goals are rooted in the lived experiences of these places. Digital mapping, which we discuss at greater length below, presents innumerable possibilities to simultaneously convene multiple and overlapping variables to suggest new connections and novel avenues of further research. Digital technologies open up opportunities to reconfigure both space *and* time that are unbound by the linearity of analog text and representations. Marisa Parham's ground-breaking formulation of the "poetics of Black digitality," for example, presents an exciting framework of speculative praxis that insists that we imagine a different world.[7]

Collaboration

What does an equitable model of collaborative partnership look like on the terrain of the digital humanities? Some of the most successful and striking digital humanities projects we encountered during our research are grounded in reflexive and democratic collaborative partnerships with students, community members and organizations, and activists. We learned much from the hard lessons of their experiences in building capacity, delegating resources and responsibilities, planning and executing design and implementation strategies, and outlining future stewardship and custodial arrangements. These challenging but critical steps can make or break the validity and impact of a project, particularly for academic researchers seeking more than a token engagement with their presumed community collaborators. The founders, scholars, and stewards of the *SNCC Digital Gateway* (a collaborative digital archive and exhibit supported and created by the SNCC Legacy Project, Duke University's Center for Documentary Studies and Duke University Libraries) describe the challenges of overcoming a long history of scholars' exploitative relationship with activists in the region. The authors cite their shared commitment to a

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[7] Parham, "Sample | Signal | Strobe: Haunting, Social Media, and Black Digitality."

common mission and set of values as the key to the Gateway's successful execution, reminding each other and themselves often that the diverse set of partners were all there for a shared goal: to tell SNCC and the Civil Rights Movement's history "from the bottom up and the 'inside out.'"[8]

Shared governance and consensus at every step reflected equal participation and input, and the activists whose stories and experiences framed and generated this project were placed at the center of decision-making. This commitment to genuine partnership and humility on the part of academic partners builds relationships based on trust and gestures towards a new model of authentic collaboration that is poised to reimagine the possibilities of public scholarship.

The SNCC Digital Gateway offers an innovative model of digital storytelling and historic conservation by preserving the testimonies and experiences of activists in the long Civil Rights movement. We also learned from the collaborative efforts of projects such as the *Anti-Eviction Mapping Project* and *Torn Apart/Separados*, both of which gathered, organized, and analyzed spatial data to address the respective crises of housing displacement and the family separation policy at the border. Both of these radical cartographic initiatives respond to the needs of vulnerable communities and individuals and build networks of activism and knowledge production from the ground up. These advocacy tools innovate new modes of data visualization and provide an invaluable ongoing service for activists around the world. Projects like these also provoke difficult questions about how structures of dispossession, racism, and inequality are produced, experienced, and mobilized across different places.

Generating questions

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[8] Augusto, Bragg, Chafe, et al., "Learn From the Past, Organize for the Future: Building the SNCC Digital Gateway."

Digital cartographic exhibits and projects constitute a substantial share of digital humanities projects. Digital mapping tools, commonly grouped under the GIS (Geographic Information Systems) umbrella, offer a wealth of analytic and interpretive methods that can map multiple and overlapping fields of data simultaneously, revealing patterns, discontinuities, and changes across time and space visually. GIS carries some ethical and political baggage, a legacy of its historic and ongoing development in the military-industrial complex. In many ways, the logics of GIS, which abstract, simplify, and isolate places, groups, or territories as fixed points in space that are bounded and static objects, reproduce the colonial mindsets of early cartographic knowledge. Feminist and postcolonial critiques of cartography and GIS have enriched our understanding of the ways in which maps are imbued with the political and cultural motives of cartographers.[9] Yet the visualization of spatial data generates new questions to guide researchers, particularly those analyzing the heritage or historical changes of place. The insights of "critical cartography," or modes of mapping practice that actively address and challenge the power dynamics that shape space, help us navigate the ethical ambiguities of using digital tools such as GIS to support and serve our community partners. Critical cartography demands that we are "relentless reflexive" in our research and program design.[10] This reflexivity forces us to closely examine our biases in what questions we seek to answer, where and how we generate data, and what modes of representation we employ to interpret and explain our findings. What interventions can the tools and insights of critical cartography contribute to revising how we define, measure, locate, and celebrate a different sense of place?

Some of the most effective cartographic digital humanities projects we visited transcended the static representations of space and place using dynamic

[9] Allen and Queen, "Beyond the Map"; Cidell, "Challenging the Contours"; Kim, "Critical Cartography 2.0"; Kitchin, Gleeson, and Dodge, "Unfolding Mapping Practices"; Thatcher et al., "Revisiting Critical GIS"; Harley, "Deconstructing the Map."

[10] Sheppard, "Knowledge Production through Critical GIS."

animated visualizations. We believe this capability would complement future research initiatives at CPCRS by encouraging students, scholars, and community partners to analyze the dense networks of mobility, migration, exchange, and connection that gave traction to the Civil Rights movement as an international mass movement. *In the Same Boats*, a digital project by Kaiama Glover and Alex Gil, is an inspiring example that visualizes the global transit of Afro-Atlantic intellectuals, such as W.E.B. DuBois, Kamau Brathwaite, Aimé Césaire, and Katherine Dunham. This innovative rendering helps us see, through their overlapping ventures across continents, how these thinkers and revolutionaries were, by virtue of geography, in conversation with one another during their careers. This project prompts us to consider similar directions at CPCRS and engages with Hall's reminder to revise the geographic and temporal boundaries of the Civil Rights movement when we reconstruct its historical narrative. In what ways did the spatial transformations of the first and second Great Migrations intertwine with the political objectives of the Civil Rights movement? Can we thread together the spatial motifs of the Afro-Atlantic diaspora with the African American diaspora to illustrate the ways in which modes of mobility and immobility shape political consciousness and architectural form alike? What kinds of knowledges, practices, and kinship structures travelled from the Black Belt to the Rust Belt, and is their trace visible in the built environment and landscape?

Digital humanities presents an opportunity to generate these connections and illustrate how networks of social kinship and political economy that stretched across geographies can substantiate reparative justice claims in cultural heritage. Robert Weyeneth, for example, traces the "architecture of racial segregation" as a historically-specific yet resilient spatial arrangement of racist domination that still informs contemporary geographies in the United States.[11] This architecture of power, which assumes its aesthetic form in response to particular legal, economic, and social constraints, also generates alternative

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[11] Weyeneth, "The Architecture of Racial Segregation."

spaces of defiance, agency, and sociality that characterize Black geographies. A digital cartography of these spaces might illustrate the "double consciousness" of place and a new way to conceptualize the experiences underlying collective memory.

The knowledge contained within and produced by practices of Black mobilities - shaped by histories of fugitivity and landscapes of forced migrations, carcerality, containment, and surveillance - also generates new forms of life, tactics of survival, and claims to space that emerge through struggle.[12] W.E.B. DuBois called this dual experience "double consciousness," a form of "second sight" that sees the landscape as a product of the contradictions between oppression and resistance.[13] These landscapes, or what geographer Katherine McKittrick calls a "black sense of place," are not visible on the maps we are accustomed to.[14] Instead, Black geographies lays out a framework of place-making that centers and celebrates Black women's knowledge, an ethics forged through care, and a different way of seeing. The insights and methods of Black geographies, which emphasizes the productive tension between oppression and struggles for freedom as a mode of place-making, thus explores the complex and diverse ways in which Black geographies are made and remade every day. These spaces are improvised, choreographed, revised, and remixed. In many ways, Black geographies presents a critical alternative framework for the digital humanities, where the digital space of the cloud, the screen, the browser, and the index can be reimagined. These digital spaces, which can layer multiple synchronic media to immerse viewers/readers in a narrative and argument, point to new modes of expressing and understanding Black geographies.

Imagining otherwise

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[12] Shabazz, *Spatializing Blackness*.

[13] Brand, "The Duality of Space"; DuBois, W.E.B., *The Souls of Black Folk*.

[14] McKittrick, "On Plantations, Prisons, and a Black Sense of Place."

How can digital methods document what bell hooks calls a "cultural genealogy of resistance" to subvert traditional models of scholarship?[15] If Black geographies gestures towards different spaces and places to look for these traces of resistance, the emerging project of Black digital humanities presents us with methods to generate what historian Kim Gallon calls a "technology of recovery."[16] For generations, Black feminist scholars have urged archival researchers to interrogate the structures of knowledge that elide, omit, or devalue Black life and heritage and recover the sites of struggle and creativity that foster Black life.[17] In analog scholarship, there is a wealth of research that reconstructs the narratives of everyday life in Black communities to underline the ways in which political questions – abolition, citizenship, incarceration, voting rights, and police violence – are experienced and metabolized in vernacular culture.[18] Among scholars working at the intersection of vernacular Black culture and history and digital humanities, we encountered several projects and research collectives that embrace the core principle of recovery to "sample and remix" Black heritage and culture.[19]

Matthew Delmont's born-digital publication, *Black Quotidian: Everyday History in African-American Newspapers* compiles hundreds of clippings and over 1,000 media objects from African American newspapers across the country to document the "joyous complexity of everyday Black lives and communities." Delmont's project began as a corrective to the "Great Man" narratives that populate African American history and highlights the everyday celebrations and

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[15] hooks, *Art on My Mind*, 151.

[16] Gallon, "Making a Case for the Black Digital Humanities."

[17] Davis, *Women, Race, & Class*; Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*; Camp, *Closer to Freedom*; hooks, *Art on My Mind*; Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*.

[18] Delmont, *The Nicest Kids in Town*; Hall, Stuart, "Notes on Deconstructing 'the Popular'"; DuBois, W.E.B., *The Souls of Black Folk*; Rooks, *Hair Raising*; Shabazz, *Spatializing Blackness*; Pattillo-McCoy, *Black Picket Fences*.

[19] Parham, "Sample | Signal | Strobe: Haunting, Social Media, and Black Digitality."

tragedies that individuals and communities encounter. From debutante balls to high school sports tournaments, obituaries to police shootings to blood drives, *Black Quotidian* ventures to recognize that "Black history can be mundane, not only triumphant or tragic." The project's structure is deliberately random, meaning users can self-curate their journey through the archives, jumping back and forth from decade to decade, city to city. Pages often feature multiple media formats, engaging audio, video, text, and images simultaneously. Black-owned and operated newspapers fostered a robust "counterpublic" and imagined community that documented, mobilized, and connected the diverse lifeways of African American society.

Newspapers may pose a more straightforward venture for archival recovery, so long as the originals have been preserved somewhere. What is the role of Black digital humanities in recovering, preserving, and giving voice to *places* that have been lost? *The Texas Freedom Colonies Project*, led by Andrea Roberts, demonstrates how an interdisciplinary methodology – triangulating property records, oral histories, ethnographies, newspaper archives, and historical research – aided her research to recover and give historical status to these forgotten places. Roberts connects the crises facing Black communities today, such as gentrification-led displacement and climate-related risks, to the early erasure of freedom colonies from state-sanctioned surveys and resources. Her findings furthermore note that place-based definitions of "historic significance" carry a host of racist biases and resource limitations that preclude access for Black heritage preservationists.[20]

Danielle Purifoy's ongoing work with the *Black Town Map*, which collects and shares the names, locations, and histories of America's Black-founded towns, provides a similar narrative of the erasure of Black geographies but incorporates the political economic critique of racial capitalism to interrogate the

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[20] Roberts, "Until the Lord Come Get Me, It Burn Down, Or the Next Storm Blow It Away"; Roberts and Biazar, "Black Placemaking in Texas."

politics of property ownership.[21] In both cases, Roberts and Purifoy work to recover and legitimate the spaces and places of everyday life - the towns, farms, homes, schools, and businesses - where the politics of segregation, exclusion, and discrimination were experienced, negotiated, and transformed. These projects confront us with the spatial continuities of structural racism, segregation, and inequality, but they also articulate visions for a future that breaks through such continuities.

In surveying the rich diversity of projects falling under the broad umbrella of Black digital humanities, we are inspired and humbled by the creativity and political commitment of these scholars and their partners who have articulated an open yet rigorous framework that is poised to transform the goals and dissemination of public scholarship. While this is certainly not a comprehensive overview of the field, we hope that these initial thoughts and directions will generate further conversation with our community partners in Alabama and Philadelphia, and forge new connections with scholars, activists, and practitioners around the world.

Avenues of future work

This essay marks out only a few generative themes and methods in the interdisciplinary spaces between digital humanities, heritage preservation, and the Civil Rights movement. These initial reflections are just that - unfinished and open. This exploration highlighted a few questions, ideas, and hunches that we'd like to learn more about:

- What kinds of media can be pieced together to learn more about the everyday places, practices, and experiences that underwrote the Civil

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[21] Purifoy, "The Parable of Black Places."Purifoy and Seamster, "Creative Extraction."

Rights movement? What does a focus on the vernacular teach us about politics?

- Can advanced digital tools, such as "distant reading," be applied to analyze building codes, zoning regulations, and housing policies at different temporal and geographical scales to understand how, where, and why residential discrimination was and continues to be embedded in a post-1968 (Fair Housing Act) landscape?
- How could cultural heritage (material and practiced) be mapped alongside demographic movement?

Essential viewings & readings

Although our website now offers a substantial (and growing) index of digital humanities projects to comb through, below are a few selections of standout exhibits and publications that have inspired us this semester.

break. dance

Black Quotidian: Everyday History in African-American Newspapers

Islands in the North

Gallon, Kim. "Making a Case for the Black Digital Humanities." In *Debates in the Digital Humanities 2016*, edited by Matthew K. Gold and Lauren F. Klein, 42-49. University of Minnesota Press, 2016.

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Kitchin, Rob, Justin Gleeson, and Martin Dodge. "Unfolding Mapping Practices: A New Epistemology for Cartography: *Unfolding Mapping Practices*." *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 38, no. 3 (July 2013): 480–96.

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Parham, Marisa. "Sample | Signal | Strobe: Haunting, Social Media, and Black Digitality." In *Debates in the Digital Humanities*, edited by Matthew Gold. Manifold, 2019. https://dhdebates.gc.cuny.edu/read/untitled-f2acf72c-a469-49d8-be35-67f9ac1e3a60/section/0fa03a28-d067-40b3-8ab1-b94d46bf00b6.

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