

# Markup Bodies

*Black [Life] Studies and Slavery [Death] Studies  
at the Digital Crossroads*

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When we shift our emphasis from historical recovery to rigorous and responsible creativity, we recognize that archives are not just the records bequeathed to us by the past; archives also consist of the tools we use to explore it, the vision that allows us to read its signs, and the design decisions that communicate our sense of history's possibilities.  
—Vincent Brown, "Mapping a Slave Revolt"

In the 1770s, Captain John Stedman, while traveling through Suriname, happened upon three "slaves" being taken in chains to be killed. One was Neptune, a free man of color, a carpenter, "young and handsome." He was accused of killing an overseer after stealing sheep to entertain a "favorite young woman." Worse, Neptune shot the overseer in self-defense when the overseer attempted to have him lynched. As punishment, Neptune was to be broken on the rack and left until dead with no "mercy stroke" or death blow to end the torture of having his arms and legs systematically shattered and woven through the spokes of a wagon wheel. As Stedman watched, the executioner, "also a black man," began by chopping off Neptune's left hand with an axe. He then took up a heavy iron bar and "with repeated heavy blows . . . broke the bones to shivers, till the marrow, blood, and splinters flew about the field." While the executioner destroyed his body, Neptune "never uttered a groan nor a sigh," but as pain and death set in, Neptune began to speak.<sup>1</sup> He "damned them all, as a set of barbarous rascals [*sic*]." He released the bonds on one hand "by the help of his teeth" and "asked the bystanders for a pipe of tobacco." He

was spat on in response. He begged for his head to be cut off. He sang. He teased a Jewish bystander by asking for money supposedly owed to him. At one point, he noticed a white soldier eating bread with no meat. When the soldier explained he had no money for meat, Neptune offered him “my hand that was chopped off clean to the bones” and encouraged him to eat “till you are glutted; when you will have both bread and meat, as best becomes you.”

Neptune did not die for three hours, and he never stopped talking. His execution, originally published in Stedman’s five-volume narrative of his time in Suriname,<sup>2</sup> almost immediately began to be remixed by abolitionists into eighteenth-century media, such as the *Curious Adventures of Captain Stedman*. For abolitionists, Neptune’s death, though narrated by Stedman, who was far from an abolitionist, offered readers necessary explanatory data. It offered neutral, stable, even quantifiable information about the depravity of bondage. Data, defined here as an objective and independent unit of knowledge, has been central to the architecture of both slavery studies and digital humanistic study. However, in this article I question the stability of what has been or can be categorized as data, the uses the idea of data has been put to, and the stakes underlying data’s implicit claim to stability or objectivity. This article uses the term *data* transhistorically to gesture to the rise of the independent and objective statistical fact as an explanatory ideal party to the devastating thingification of black women, children, and men.<sup>3</sup> In other words, for abolitionists, Neptune’s death-as-data evidenced the carnal violence of overseers, drama of slavery, injustice meted out to free and enslaved alike, and vulgarity of black death. But *Curious Adventures*, like much abolitionist media that claimed to advocate for the enslaved, also recreated and legitimized a ledger of torture.<sup>4</sup>

This article questions the role spectacular black death and commodification in slavery’s eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Atlantic archive play alongside the digital humanities’ drive for data and a centuries-long black diasporic fight for justice and redress.<sup>5</sup> The brutality of black codes, the rise of Atlantic slaving, and everyday violence in the lives of the enslaved created a devastating archive. Left unattended, these devastations reproduce themselves in digital architecture, even when and where digital humanists believe they advocate for social justice. A just attention to the dead, I argue, requires digital humanists to learn from black freedom struggles and radical coalition building that offer new models for “social justice, accessibility, and inclusion.”<sup>6</sup> Black freedom struggles here are defined as struggles engaged in by subjects racialized as black to mark their humanity, make legible their legal and extralegal exclusion from societies built by their labor, and form new worlds by transforming and creating inclusive and equitable social conditions. In this article, I suggest that black digital practice is the interface by which black freedom

struggles challenge reproduction of black death and commodification, countering the presumed neutrality of the digital. Black digital practice is the revelation that black subjects have themselves taken up science, data, and coding, in other words, have commodified themselves and digitized and mediated their own black freedom dreams, in order to hack their way into systems (whether modernity, science, or the West), thus living where they were “never meant to survive.”<sup>7</sup>

## Black Data and the Slavery Debates

Digital media changes the way users as readers and viewers digest information. It breaks the linearity of traditional print media’s analog left-to-right text interaction. It introduces readers/viewers to a multitiered landscape. In a digital media environment, lurkers, commenters, visitors, viewers, and users replace readers. Lost is the single author who, in cahoots with an editor and publishing entity, guides a reader down a distinct and clear path. Presented with a series of choices, readers may now settle into a site or project at any number of plot points; skim, curate, and comment; indulge in media annotation; or leave a site entirely after a cursory glance at a headline or subtitle. New relationships to information and new roles (the user) are born, while others fall away. Viewed from a digital utopian standpoint, the range of choices, tools, and opportunities to engage, challenge, and create information or “content” democratizes, having arrived available to all users without an apparent imbalance of power or discernable limits imposed by social categories of difference, history, or historical context.

In the United States, historians of slavery have made particular use of digital tools to document the forced migration of black women, children, and men throughout the Atlantic littoral over the last five centuries. In 1974, Eugene Genovese coined the phrase “the world the slaves made” to describe the political economy, society, and culture of the antebellum South.<sup>8</sup> Over four decades later, scholars struggle to translate “the world the slaves made” into code and express it in technical language. From blogs and journals built on fourth-generation hypertext markup language (HTML) guided by cascading style sheets (CSS) to databases using extensible markup language (XML) and standard query language (SQL), scholars using digital tools mark up the bodies and requantify the lives of people of African descent. These pursuits have not and do not exist in isolation from tensions inherent to constructing histories of bondage. Databases, for example, reinscribe enslaved Africans’ biometrics as users transfer the racial nomenclature of the time period (*négre*, *moreno*, *quadroon*) into the present and encode skin color, hair texture, height, weight, age, and gender in new digital forms, replicating the surveilling

actions of slave owners and slave traders. There is nothing neutral, even in a digital environment, about doing histories of slavery, and technology has not made the realities of bondage any more palatable or easier to discuss across audiences or platforms. Exploring these anxieties in analog and digital form exposes an unsettled relationship among data, slavery's archive, and the impulse to commodify black life. As Vincent Brown, historian of slavery and founder of the History Design Studio at Harvard, notes in the epigraph of this article, "Archives are not just the records bequeathed to us by the past." The legacy of commodifying black bodies and truncating black life infuses and informs digital design and execution.

Historians, communities, and political institutions have struggled over the pursuit of different kinds of data and the roles these should play in histories of slavery. Early black historians such as W. E. B. Du Bois, Carter G. Woodson, and Lorenzo Johnston Greene touted the legitimacy of enslaved testimony and created methods for compiling quantitative and qualitative information on early black life. From the 1890s forward, black historians and their allies compiled, aggregated, and visualized data to detail black life in the United States from a black perspective. In the preface to *Black Reconstruction*, Du Bois described his goal as to "tell this story as though Negroes were ordinary human beings, realizing that this attitude will from the first seriously curtail my audience."<sup>9</sup> In 1916, Woodson hacked the largely segregated professional historical world by founding the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History and the *Journal of Negro History*. Woodson and his team, the Research Department of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, collected and published on a range of topics, including runaway slave ads, laws regulating slavery and slave codes, reports from "colored conventions," and statistical reports on slave-owning free black men and women.<sup>10</sup> In doing so, the Research Department expressed what might be described as faith in the revelatory potential of black data, a hope that "these names will, therefore, serve as a link between the past and present and will thereby lessen the labor of research in this field."<sup>11</sup>

In the 1950s and into the 1970s, with the civil rights movement raging around them, scholars like John Blassingame, Stanley Elkins, Eugene Genovese, Herbert Gutman, and Kenneth Stampp revisited histories of slavery to better understand the nature of black life in the Americas. In addition to rereading plantation diaries and manuscript sources with a critical eye for what the enslaved may have said about their world, historians reintroduced testimony from enslaved persons themselves. Blassingame's *Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (1972) and his immense *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies* (1977) directly challenged the legacy of southern historians like U. B. Phillips who asserted testimony by the enslaved

was “issued with so much abolitionist editing that as a class their authenticity is doubtful.” Instead, Blassingame argued enslaved testimony, used with rigor, could reveal the “mind of the slave,” their “private world,” “accommodations with masters,” and black culture and kinship practices.<sup>12</sup> These historians also drew on slave ship manifests, lists of enslaved in plantation documents, and census records. The impulse to revisit the plantation South from the perspective of black laborers and their experiences contributed to changing conceptions of data as historians struggled with which sources would be of value, what meaning could be gleaned from narratives and numbers, and what archival material appeared to be stable, objective, and quantifiable. Many of these scholars emerged from their research with differing conclusions about the slave personality, the role African retentions played in making African America, the nature of resistance, and black family life. Naturally, these histories and how they were written generated intense and heated debates.

In the 1970s, a subset of cliometricians, a cohort of researchers using statistics to write economic studies of history, grew especially interested in the slavery debates. Cliometricians paid special interest to quantifying the lives of the enslaved but were motivated by very qualitative considerations—the tense and emotional tenor of the topic. In later years, Robert Fogel, coauthor with Stanley Engerman of *Time on the Cross: The Economics of Negro Slavery*, described the cliometric struggle with slavery as emerging from a “desire to develop a precise, emotionally detached, ideologically neutral analysis.”<sup>13</sup> When Fogel and Engerman applied statistical methods to their data, they concluded that the material lives of enslaved black women, children, and men were better, on average, than those of twentieth-century African Americans. In fact, in their estimation, slavery was an efficient and modern economic institution, quite compatible with “shifting labor requirements of capitalist society.”<sup>14</sup> Historians wading through an archive dense with the brutal realities of bondage—separation of families, brutal punishments and summary executions, rape and sexual violence—reacted with outrage. An indignant Herbert Gutman published expressive critiques of their strategy. In *Slavery and the Numbers Game: A Critique of “Time on the Cross,”* Gutman identified the methodological problem as a “model [that] mixes two processes together: how slaves learned and what slaves learned.”<sup>15</sup> Statistics on their own, enticing in their seeming neutrality, failed to address or unpack black life hidden behind the archetypes, caricatures, and nameless numbered registers of human property slave owners had left behind. And cliometricians failed to remove emotion from the discussion. Data without an accompanying humanistic analysis—an exploration of the world of the enslaved from their own perspective—served to further obscure the social and political realities of black diasporic life under slavery.

The ramifications of the slavery debates lingered over another gathering, nearly forty years later. In 1998, David Eltis and David Richardson launched a database containing almost thirty thousand Atlantic slave trade voyages.<sup>16</sup> Each record in the database represented a different slave ship. Each field in each record supplied information culled from the ship's original manifest—name of the ship and captain, dates of the voyage, number of slaves on board, place of slave purchase, and landing. The computational power of the database as technology and tool allowed researchers to calculate new information about slave ship voyages based on incomplete records. If the handwritten manifest provided a total count of slaves on the ship along with a tally of adult male slaves among those on board, the database calculated the balance—the number of women and children of both genders also on the ship—at lightning speed. The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database was a massive project, supported by the W. E. B. Du Bois Institute for African and African American Research at Harvard and led by well-published and well-known names in the fields of United States, Caribbean, and Latin America history. The questions posed by the researchers emerged from the same set of concerns first articulated during the slavery debates and the work of cliometricians in the 1960s: how to grasp the depth and patterns in the massive trade in human beings and its impact on the making of the Americas.

At a public conference hosted by the College of William and Mary, researchers presented their CD-ROM and its findings. By some observer accounts, researchers seemed unprepared to grapple with the needs and desires of busloads of “descendants of slaves” in the audience, who attended to learn more about the ramifications of the slave trade. Understanding the dimensions of slave ships provided context for the experience of the Middle Passage but could not seem to capture the moral rupture and sense of injustice expressed by people of African descent in the room.<sup>17</sup> Once again, metrics in minutiae neither lanced historical trauma nor bridged the gap between the past itself and the search for redress. Computation could not, it seemed, capture the violent quandary that was the nation's history of and relationship to human bondage. Contemporary encounters with digital technology have inherited this tension, with researchers struggling to appreciate the inhumanity of bondage and the attendant dehumanization of black lives while also responding to the need for critical, rigorous, and engaged histories of slavery as histories of the present.<sup>18</sup>

In 2008, the database creators celebrated the database's move from CD-ROM format to online database and open-access website with a free, public conference at Emory University commemorating the bicentennial of the end of the slave trade. The conference featured presentations from scholars, including David Brion Davis, Alondra Nelson, and Sylviane Diouf, as well as librarians, curators, archivists, and graduate students,

along with the project's team. Topics ranged from teaching histories of the slave trade in the classroom to studying histories of the slave trade and genetic genealogy testing. Conference organizers circulated news about the event on African American genealogy listservs and online forums like AfriGeneas.com.<sup>19</sup> The design of the new website reflected a new attention to pedagogy, analysis, and the human dimensions of black life in the era of the slave trade. Along with the database itself, the site featured long-form essays by scholars from around the world explaining the significance of the slave trade to the making of the Americas. Designers diversified the data available for research by including lesson plans for K-12 teachers with suggestions on how to use the slave trade database as a teaching tool and nontext resources like images of the original ship manifests, sample maps, and portraits of trans-Atlantic sojourners like Job Ben Solomon and Catherine Zimmermann-Mulgrave.<sup>20</sup> For those needing information quickly, Eltis and Richardson offered their general estimates in chart and graph form. And for those without access to the internet, Eltis and Richardson published the first ever *Atlas of the Transatlantic Slave Trade*, a groundbreaking collection of charts, graphs, and maps documenting the movement of Africans throughout the Atlantic in more ways than would have been imaginable in 1998.

Over the next few years, the project team hosted public presentations around the country. An event in Washington, DC, included computers allowing attendees to explore the database and a welcome message from Congressman John Lewis, venerable civil rights activist and national hero, who consecrated the space when he offered his support for the project. Website administrators created a Facebook page and a Twitter account, both to provide the new site with a social media presence and to create an online gathering space for interested researchers, university affiliated and otherwise, to discuss the findings and the database's impact. Eltis and Richardson reintroduced their findings in a coauthored essay featured on CNN.com.<sup>21</sup> The site itself—free, available online, visually stimulating, and utilitarian—offered something to university-affiliated researchers as well as genealogists, journalists, K-12 teachers, and laypeople engaged in casual ancestry research. Between 1998 and 2010, more and more African Americans began using DNA kits to trace African lineage.<sup>22</sup> Increasingly, genealogy, family, and professional historical work had moved online, from listservs to social media platforms, forums like AfriGeneas, and for-profit genealogy companies like Ancestry.com. In 2011, Ancestry.com outpaced nonprofit and institutional websites to become the “largest online collection of African American family history records.”<sup>23</sup> By participating in social media, reaching out to African ancestry networks, and generating public history content for online news outlets, the Transatlantic Slave Trade Database reboot mirrored the pursuits of earlier,

analog historians researching slavery as an issue of social justice. Reaching out to the descendants of the enslaved across the United States by using digital and social media tools acknowledged, if only in a small way, the legitimacy of descendants' claim to data on their ancestors mined from slave ship registers. It translated the computational tool from a university-funded digital project to a community resource accessible to users well beyond the academy.

The impact of database technology on histories of black life has been huge. The ease with which open-access projects like the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database performed extraordinary acts of simple figuring permanently changed perceptions of the slave trade. Inheriting slave traders' gendered assumptions about economic self-interest among slave trade merchants and slaveholders in the Americas, historians assumed enslaved women and children played a negligible role in the slave trade. Most extant slave ship manifests provide incomplete information about gender and age of enslaved Africans. For imperial officials, traders, ship captains, and sailors plying their trade up and down the Atlantic African coast, women and youth represented a negligible remainder and potentially less lucrative demographic. In 1728, Jean-Baptiste Labat described women and children as fractions of piece d'Inde, the unit of measurement used for enslaved cargo, and used to supplement able-bodied adult men: "Namely two children for one man or two and a half for one, sometimes three for one or three for two, in this way according to the experience of the Commis and how they look and the goodwill for the interest of the Company."<sup>24</sup> In reality, evidence from the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database suggested that more enslaved women and children crossed the Atlantic than previously assumed, and insights gained from the advanced computation offered by the database further clarified the significance of African women and youth in different time periods, to different imperial interests, and in different parts of the Americas. The database powered and empowered users to find women and youth, making information from ship manifests around the world public, accessible, and searchable. The existence of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database immediately reshaped debates about numbers of women and children exported from the continent, influencing work on women in the slave trade on the African coast, slavery in African societies, and women in the slave trade to the Americas.<sup>25</sup>

At the same time, the database in and of itself could not function as a window into the everyday lives of Africans, who remained faceless, anonymous, disembodied. In slave ship manifests, instructional material, slave ships' logs, and colonial censuses, European investors, trading company agents, merchants, ship captains, and slave owners created a genre of archival material antithetical to black life. The unmaking of the enslaved,



as Sowande' Mustakeem has noted, included the work Europeans applied to compiling and calculating the enslaved.<sup>26</sup> In slaving conventions along the African coast, in slave traders' desire to transform women and youth into units of measurement, in the symbolic and reproductive labor enslaved African women would be forced to perform, compilers of slave ship manifests participated in the transmutation of black flesh into integers and fractions. This alchemy, powerful in and of itself, meant displaying data alone could not and did not offer the atonement descendants of slaves sought or capture the inhumanity of this archive's formation. Culling the lives of women and children from the data set required approaching the data with intention. It required a methodology attuned to black life and to dismantling the methods used to create the manifests in the first place, then designing and launching an interface responsive to the desire of descendants of slaves for reparation and redress. The 2008 reintroduction of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database did some of this when organizers encouraged a coalition of scholars, community members, and everyday citizens to explore the ramifications of the trade.

The archive of Atlantic slavery—images, numbers, and texts created by slave owners, traders, investors, abolitionists, and the enslaved themselves—haunts efforts to render black people as human. Abolitionists generated content to provoke a hyperemotional response in readers—an excessive reproduction of black death and pain to overcompensate for a dense archive of enslaved integers generated across centuries. From the “blood-stained gate” in Frederick Douglass's autobiographical narrative to Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, abolitionists relied on a spectacle of black death to elicit emotion from white American and British readers/viewers—and they were successful. These images did not result in equitable or equal treatment in the postemancipation era. Time traveling centuries later, cliometricians' desire to—and failure to—excise emotion from the slavery debates by centering the numbers themselves proved that statistics alone also did not make the history of bondage any easier to digest or the terms of redress more transparent. The data set, corrupted by its creation as part of a project of manufacturing slaves and masters, needed to be defragmented before it could be used. And yet it is the only archive from which the descendants of slaves can demand “a fully loaded cost accounting.”<sup>27</sup>

### “Good Mourning,” Digital Black Studies

As this brief history of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database suggests, bias is built into the architecture of digital technology.<sup>28</sup> The digital, like any tool, institution, or system across society, from law and medicine to the academy, will be radical or transformative only to the extent that

researchers, programmers, designers, hackers, and users make an effort to dismantle the residue of commodification that is slavery's legacy in the New World. Invoking black digital practice draws attention to the many ways users, content creators, coders, and programmers have worked ethical, intentional praxis into their work in pursuit of more just and humane productions of knowledge. Because blackness is most often constructed in proximity to bondage and the rise of Atlantic slaving, black digital practice uses the commodification of blackness during the slave trade as a reference point, building sites, projects, organizations, and tools that resist and counteract slavery's dehumanizing impulses. A rich world created through black digital practice has long existed online and has operated within and beyond the academy. At the same time, black digital practice models a core black studies imperative: That the study of black life and culture must also accompany an ethical and moral concern with sustaining black life and shaping black futures.

Black digital practice outside of the academy informed and shaped the rise of digital black studies within the academy. The Afrofuturism listserv and its companion website Afrofuturism.net were some of the first to draw together a digital community of scholars, creatives, and activists.<sup>29</sup> Founded in 1998 by Alondra Nelson, the Afrofuturism listserv brought artists together with academics and activists to discuss and describe the ways black diasporic communities used technology and science fiction and participated in cyber/digital cultures. Taking up Afrofuturism, a term coined by Mark Dery in 1993, Nelson and others transformed it into a clarion call, gathering black creatives invested in creating fantastic visions of black futures.<sup>30</sup> Many did so using rich traditions of resistance from the past or already in existence and, though looking to the future, built online community that set the terms for a kind of black digital practice that would be both shaped by and shape slavery studies. To spread awareness about the Afrofuturism project, Nelson created postcards and distributed them "at museums, universities, music venues and cyber-cafes (remember those spots!) in New York City," as well as while traveling to California, Barcelona, London, and Kingston, Jamaica.<sup>31</sup> Nelson's radical media practice informed her digital practice as she created a community that spanned analog and digital spaces. In the introduction to a special issue of *Social Text* on Afrofuturism, Nelson wrote:

The text and images gathered here reflect African diasporic experience and at the same time attend to the transformations that are the by-product of new media and information technology. They excavate and create original narratives of identity, technology, and the future and offer critiques of the promises of prevailing theories of technoculture. . . . These works represent new directions in the study of African diaspora culture that are grounded

in the histories of black communities, rather than seeking to sever all connections to them.<sup>32</sup>

Shortly after the creation of the Afrofuturism list, in 2000 Abdul Alkalimat launched eBlack Studies, a series of initiatives to bring about a “transformation” in the field of black studies, to move the field “from ideology to information.” Describing his goals for the eBlack Studies movement, Alkalimat stated: “eBlack, the virtualization of the Black experience, is the basis for the next stage of our academic discipline.”<sup>33</sup> For both Nelson and Alkalimat, digital blackness could not be removed from life beyond the screen and could not be divorced from the politics of everyday black life. Alkalimat is a founding member of the Organization of Black American Culture, the Institute of the Black World, the Peoples College, the African Liberation Support Committee, and the Black Radical Congress, and his political teaching and research included working with students and organizers to print and publish newsletters, pamphlets, and booklets. In the tradition of community publishing and radical media, and akin to Nelson, Alkalimat disseminated information about Black Power philosophy, the Black Panthers, Malcolm X, and numerous political campaigns by creating content in the form of zines, CDs, and curricula. For Alkalimat, transitioning to an online space was a logical extension of grassroots organizing media work. The H-Afro-Am listserv was one of many eBlack Studies initiatives. A mailing list and global community of subscribers of all ages from inside and outside of academia, H-Afro-Am distributes information about black diasporic history, life, and culture to subscribers’ e-mail inboxes on a daily basis. Under Alkalimat’s editorial leadership, the listserv continues to be an important member of H-Net: Humanities and Social Sciences Online.<sup>34</sup>

Appropriating digital tools for black diasporic purposes is a recurring theme in the history of black life online. H-Afro-Am, Afrofuturism.net, and other networked communities of black thought workers and culture producers came into existence with the aid of a new technology: the electronic mailing list. A software created in 1986, Listserv allowed users to send single messages to subscription lists or “mailing lists,” communicating with multiple recipients simultaneously. Use of Listserv spread and the creation of electronic mailing lists (colloquially called “listservs” as well), changed communication patterns and possibilities. Individuals and institutions doing work in black diasporic studies and global political organizing used mailing lists to connect with people of African descent around the world. Nelson noted ways listservs allowed Afrofuturist creatives to build relationships over long distances and organize the Afrofuturism special issue.<sup>35</sup> In *The Social Life of DNA: Race, Reparations, and Reconciliation after the Genome*, Nelson again used listservs, in addition to

message boards and social media, to participate in digital communities of African American ancestry researchers and genealogists. In *Digital Diaspora: A Race for Cyberspace*, Anna Everett documents the use of listservs by organizations like Women of Uganda Network and networked communities like Naijanet to expand activist work, create social ties, share resources, and raise awareness. Listserv use drew on a longer tradition of radical print media and political investment in building community, creating new worlds, and organizing against injustice. Technology did not in and of itself create black communities in the digital realm. Black communities with insurgent political praxis and black diasporic longing appropriated technological tools to create new digital realms. Black digital practice, in other words, predates digital interventions, drawing on strategies of empowerment, joy, and kinship created out of black freedom struggles to facilitate the use of digital tools and create new methodologies, practices, and even ethics for their use.<sup>36</sup>

Black digital practice, like black freedom struggles, does not operate isolated from broader struggles against systemic violence and dehumanization. A coalition of artists, scholars, teachers, and media makers working in the field of digital humanities and offering provocations from the fields of ethnic studies, women's and gender studies, queer studies, environmental studies, and beyond have challenged utterances of the digital that do not attend to the ways race, sex, and power shape the user interface and human-machine engagement overall. The rise of the digital humanities, including the subgenre of digital history, was characterized by interest in digital archives, exhibits, online publishing, listservs like H-Net, and other public-facing humanistic work. The presence of humanistic ventures like Afrofuturism.net and eBlack Studies gets little if any reference in histories of digital humanities as a field.<sup>37</sup> The absence of digital work engaging questions of race, sex, and systems of oppression and difference generated by black studies, ethnic studies, and women and gender studies, among others, has forced scholars to critique the digital humanities' very conception of itself. The #transformDH collective, formed in 2011, offered a recent challenge to the field. Members of the collective argued that the consolidation of digital humanities as a field presented university-affiliated laborers with an opportunity to embark on an explicitly antiracist, anti-ableist, radical and inclusive academic project. #transformDH described itself as "an academic guerrilla movement seeking to (re)define capital-letter Digital Humanities as a force for transformative scholarship by collecting, sharing, and highlighting projects that push at its boundaries and work for social justice, accessibility, and inclusion."<sup>38</sup> Also in 2011, Lisa Nakamura and Peter A. Chow-White published an edited collection of work dissecting "race after the internet." Writing as practitioner-scholars, Nakamura, Chow-White, Tara McPherson, danah

boyd, and others critiqued critical race studies and the digital humanities for their inability to attend to each other.<sup>39</sup> Over the last decade, this critique has given rise to analog, digital, and organizational structures for challenging and recoding race, difference, power, digital, and tech. Although employing varied critical and transformative methods, sometimes with different end goals, a key concern continues to wend its way through their challenge of the digital moment: supporting the disruption created by “hybrid practitioners: artist-theorists, programming humanists, activist-scholars, theoretical-archivists, critical race coders” who infuse the drive for data with a corresponding concern with and for the humanity and souls of the people involved.<sup>40</sup>

With the advent of social media, these transformative, coalitional calls for radical use of digital technology and attention to dismantling systemic violence experienced a moment of glorious excess and painful extravagance. The founding of Twitter in 2006, Tumblr in 2007, and Instagram in 2010 brought black diasporic cultural, political, and social life into an intimate and seemingly sudden public spotlight. Even as the digital humanities has yet to broaden its scope to consider work on these platforms—or the political critique they offer—serious intellectual work in the form of status updates and self-curated still and moving images interrogate intersectionality, antiblackness, and antiviolence on Tumblr. Celebrity and everyday personas call out white supremacy in short videos, snaps, and tweets and sit in 140-character solidarity with anticolonial and antiviolence movements from Palestine to Ferguson to Brazil. Users pepper blogs, timelines, and direct messages with a mutable cyborg *kréyòl*—a stank, funky, digital vulgarity—that employs hashtags, abbreviations, and other alternative grammars to capture the flesh of a moment, a person, a group. Operating in the interstices between listservs and blogging platforms, social media users have exploded nineteenth-century codes of race and eighteenth-century denominations of color, defying naturalized assumptions of race, sexuality, gender, and gender presentation through promiscuous use of avatars, changing pseudonyms and nicknames and even deleting or reviving user accounts at will. As social media communities formed around hashtags like #BlackTwitter, #blacklivesmatter, or #girlslikeus, users who share identities, their allies, and their accomplices come together, seeking to defend and define themselves, excavate and protecting black life in all of its varied forms.<sup>41</sup> Despite the dangers, social media became a tool for cultural critique, political dissent, and forming communities of chosen kin.<sup>42</sup>

In this latest iteration of black digital practice, black life is understood as deep and rich, full of infinite gender possibilities, kinship formations, and affective knowledges. New ethics have emerged to account for the multiple layers of jeopardy and hypersurveillance that track where

blackness intersects with ability, gender identity and presentation, class, and institutional privilege.<sup>43</sup> In 2015, as part of the Center for Solutions to Online Violence coordinated by Jacque Wernimont, Moya Bailey, and T. L. Cowan and facilitated by Bianca Laureano, a group of black feminist and radical womyn of color digital media makers came together as the Digital Alchemists to create parameters for identifying power, control, harm, and respect in online interactions.<sup>44</sup> Facilitating real-time, on-the-ground theorization, black digital practice in social media has also engaged black theory created in the academy but does not cede legitimacy to disciplinary formations of any kind—even black studies. #BlackTheory becomes a living organ, debated and fought for with vigor and virulence online just as it has been debated and fought for in the infrapolitical spaces of the barber shop, beauty parlor, street corner, and the kitchen table.<sup>45</sup> Social media offered the terrain, but users engaged in black digital practice took advantage and did so from and through an attention to black life that preceded the technology. Users (people) continue to be the ones who make present and prescient the many layers and modes black freedom struggles will take. From the personal to the political, from the embodied to the spiritual, from the human to the community, black digital practice charts a path against the drive for data. It curates the mourning, disassembles against the plantation impulse, and, in the break, absconds.<sup>46</sup>

### Neptune Speaking

As imperial authorities and agents of slave owners tortured him to death, Neptune continued to speak. Although abolitionists at the time and historians in the present find it compelling to linger on the spectacle his death created, I find his stubborn refusal to remain silent of special interest. Whether a figment of Stedman's imagination or a real person, in the eighteenth-century white readers (users) found themselves confounded by enslaved and free black people's ability to speak through superhuman circumstances of death and dehumanization. Neptune's monologue, I argue, rests hand in hand with the shadowed spaces of empty cells, null values, and recalculated conclusions in the slave ship manifest. The slave trade, in its drive for profit, dismantled black humanity. It is this twinned reality, the entanglement of profit with dismembered black limbs, the immense data generated by death and for capital, that digital humanistic study must contend with and slavery studies cannot hope to hide from. There is no bloodless data in slavery's archive. Data is the evidence of terror, and the idea of data as fundamental and objective information, as Fogel and Engerman found,<sup>47</sup> obscures rather than reveals the scene of the crime. Black digital practice offers a corrective. It attends to black subjects who scream in spite, because, and in defiance of their own ritual murder. Black

digital practice requires researchers to witness and remark on the marked and unmarked bodies, the ones that defy computation, and finds ways to hold the null values up to the light. It compels designers to collaborate with the living descendants of the enslaved, who still claim as ancestor and kin those who can only be rendered in databases as “1” or a single pièce d’Inde. It is also slippery, in that it engages data promiscuously, across multiple platforms, taking up the nearest tools at hand to defy, dismiss, jeer, and sneer at the presumed legitimacy claimed by institutional structures and categories of analysis generated by the Ivory Tower.

Scholars of slavery, deep in the archive of bloodied backs, lost limbs, and underwater ghosts, have something to offer the digital era. Rooted in the work African American historians accomplished when they were largely barred from the segregated academy, and infused with Afrofuturism’s spectral and prophetic vision, scholars of slavery can be informed by this new black digital practice as it emerges, learning from its attention to the descendants of diaspora and deep care for black humanity. As a digital humanist, I witness something happening in digital media, social media, online activism, and hashtag activism that hearkens back in time to screams in the archive, jokes in the face of death, to black cultural production and acts of resistance. “History,” Saidiya Hartman writes, “is how the secular world attends to the dead.”<sup>48</sup> Histories of slavery offer digital humanists a cautionary tale, a lesson in the kind of death dealing that happens when enumerating, commodifying, and calculating bodies becomes naturalized.<sup>49</sup> Doing truly embodied and data-rich histories of slavery requires similarly remixing conceptual, discursive, and archival geographies, with deliberate, pained intimacy, and, likely, some violence. But black digital practice challenges slavery scholars and digital humanists to feel this pain and infuse their work with a methodology and praxis that centers the descendants of the enslaved, grapples with the uncomfortable, messy, and unquantifiable, and in doing so, refuses disposability.

## Notes

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1. Tegg, *Curious Adventures of Captain Stedman*, 18–19.

2. Stedman, *Narrative of a Five Years’ Expedition*. Over a century later, editors Richard Price and Sally Price would critique Stedman as forming his narrative of

Neptune's death at least in part from the template of the tortured slave created by the death of the fictional slave Oroonoko in Aphra Behn's story of the same name. They likewise note, "The event Stedman describes as an eyewitness needed no literary precursor. . . . We see no reason to doubt the directness or veracity of Stedman's description" (Price and Price, *Narrative of a Five Years Expedition*, 339n285).

3. This definition of *data* draws on Johanna Drucker's definition (and critique) of *data* as "objective information." Drucker notes: "Data are presumed to reside in a stable, quantifiable, observable universe. The observer assumes that the data have an a priori existence, independent of observation"; however, "information does not exist in a natural state, available to the light of reason in the form of knowledge ordered to display itself in a self-evident way" ("Graphesis," 7). See also Drucker, *Graphesis*. As Jennifer Morgan has noted, in relation to the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, "It is nearly impossible to recognize that the very data through which specificity can be attained is part and parcel of the technology by which Africans and their descendants are rendered outside the scope of Man" ("Accounting for 'the Most Excruciating Torment,'" 189). See also Poovey, *History of the Modern Fact*. In 1955, Aimé Césaire articulated this link through the following decolonial math: "My turn to state an equation: colonization = thingification" (*Discourse on Colonialism*, 42).

4. Stedman, *Stedman's Surinam*, 338. See also Diana Paton's review of Marcus Wood in "Telling Stories about Slavery"; Wood, *Slavery, Empathy, and Pornography*; Behn, *Oroonoko*, 237–39; and Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives*, 138.

5. Here, the term *redress* draws on the work of Alondra Nelson, whose study of African Americans' use of DNA, genealogy research, and claims for reparations from slavery roots itself in a long African American freedom struggle stretching into the twenty-first century. Nelson uses *redress* to articulate African Americans' desire for more than adherence to historical memory or monetary compensation for violence impossible to imagine and even more difficult to recompense. Nelson, *Social Life of DNA*, 125–26.

6. #transformDH Collective, "About #transformDH," [transformdh.org/about-transformdh/](http://transformdh.org/about-transformdh/) (accessed July 26, 2018).

7. Lorde, "A Litany for Survival," 255.

8. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*.

9. Du Bois, "To the Reader," in *Black Reconstruction*, n.p.

10. *Journal of Negro History*, "Typical Colonization Convention"; *Journal of Negro History*, "Eighteenth Century Slaves as Advertised by Their Masters"; Hansen, "Letters, Narratives, Laws, and Comments."

11. Research Department, "Free Negro Owners of Slaves."

12. Blassingame, *Slave Testimony*, xvii.

13. Fogel, *Slavery Debates*, 28.

14. Fogel and Engerman, *Time on the Cross*, 57.

15. Gutman, *Slavery and the Numbers Game*, 6.

16. Eltis et al., *Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade*.

17. Berlin, "American Slavery in History." On redress and African Americans' search for history and social justice through studies of slavery, see Nelson, *Social Life of DNA*.

18. For the most recent work on this, see Connolly and Fuentes, "Introduction"; and Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives*.

19. AfriGeneas is operated by the Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Society, based in Washington, DC.

20. Bluett, *Some Memoirs of the Life of Job*; Lovejoy, "Les origines de Catherine Mulgrave Zimmermann."



21. Eltis and Richardson, “New Revelations.”
22. Nelson, *Social Life of DNA*. In 2003, African Ancestry, a genetic testing company marketing to African Americans doing genealogy research, was founded by African American businessman and biologist Rick Kittles.
23. Ancestry Corporate, “Ancestry.com Marks Black History Month with 250,000 New African American Records,” 1 February 2001, [www.ancestry.com/corporate/newsroom/press-releases/ancestry.com-marks-black-history-month-with-250000-new-african-american-records--](http://www.ancestry.com/corporate/newsroom/press-releases/ancestry.com-marks-black-history-month-with-250000-new-african-american-records--).
24. Labat, *Nouvelle Relation de l’Afrique Occidentale*, 4:232–33.
25. For work that uses the database to reshape conversations on women in the trade, see Morgan, “Accounting for ‘the Most Excruciating Torment’”; Morgan, *Laboring Women*; and Nwokeji, *Slave Trade and Culture in the Bight of Biafra*.
26. For more on the slave trade as manufacturing slaves, see Mustakeem, *Slavery at Sea*. See also the African American Intellectual History Society’s forum on *Slavery at Sea*, including Johnson, “Moral Challenge of the Middle Passage”; Egerton, “Unearthing the Human Stories”; Fuentes, “Violent and Violating Archive”; Millward, “From the Ocean Floor”; Rothman, “Unspeakable Toll”; Holden, “Reading the Language of Violence”; and Mustakeem, “Ghosts of the Atlantic.”
27. Painter, *Southern History across the Color Line*, chap. 1. On defragmentation (or “defragging”): “Most hard drives have spinning platters, with data stored in different places around that platter. When your computer writes data to your drive, it does so in ‘blocks’ that are ordered sequentially from one side of the drive’s platter to the other. Fragmentation happens when those files get split between blocks that are far away from each other. The hard drive then takes longer to read that file because the read head has to ‘visit’ multiple spots on the platter. Defragmentation puts those blocks back in sequential order, so your drive head doesn’t have to run around the entire platter to read a single file.” Gordon, “What Is ‘Defragging.’”
28. For over a year after Mike Brown’s shooting death, Larry Fellows, a St. Louis–born Ferguson activist and Twitter user, greeted his morning followers with the following: “Good mourning.” Fellows III (@GeekNStereo), Twitter post, 30 April 2015, 7:49 a.m. [deleted tweet].
29. Nelson, “Afrofuturism.” Afrofuturism on Yahoo Groups (afrofuturism@yahogroups.com) has since been retired. Members of the listserv community created a new website to collect and list Afrofuturist work and creators at Afrofuturism.net. In 2011, Nelson posted “Afrofuturism: Archive,” a short history of its beginnings, on her blog.
30. Dery, “Black to the Future.” Dery noted: “Can a community whose past has been deliberately rubbed out, and whose energies have subsequently been consumed by the search for legible traces of its history, imagine possible futures? Furthermore, isn’t the unreal estate of the future already owned by the technocrats, futurologists, streamliners, and set designers—white to a man—who have engineered our collective fantasies?” (180).
31. See Nelson, “Afrofuturism: Archive.”
32. Nelson, “Introduction,” 10.
33. Alkalimat, “eBlack Studies.” The project continues at eBlackStudies.org. Alkalimat is also the founder of brothermalcolm.net and is at work on a digital archive of his work at alkalimat.org.
34. In 1992 Peter Knupfer founded H-Net. In 1996 the Organization of American Historians published a roundtable on the enterprise, edited by Knupfer and featuring editors who worked closely with the organization from its inception. Knupfer, “H-Net.”

35. Nelson, "Introduction," 10.

36. "Black Code," a special issue of *Black Scholar* edited by Jessica Marie Johnson and Mark Anthony Neal, expands on the methodologies, practices, and ethics generated by black diasporic activity online, particularly on social media. For more work on ethics, see the Digital Alchemists subset of educator resources developed by the Center for Solutions to Online Violence ([femtechnet.org/csov/educator/](http://femtechnet.org/csov/educator/)). The Digital Alchemists include Bianca Laureano, I'Nasah Crockett, Megan Ortiz, Jessica Marie Johnson, Sydette, IAM, Danielle, and Moya Bailey.

37. See Burdick et al., *Digital Humanities*; Gold, *Debates in the Digital Humanities*; and Gold and Klein, *Debates in the Digital Humanities 2016*. Essays in Gold and Klein's 2016 edition of *Debates in the Digital Humanities* work to correct this narrative. See Gallon, "Making a Case for the Black Digital Humanities." The history of the field of digital humanities, and especially digital history, is often traced to work by Edward Ayers and Roy Rosenzweig. See Edward Ayers, "The Pasts and Futures of Digital History: Edward L. Ayers," Virginia Center for Digital History, 1999, [www.vcdh.virginia.edu/PastsFutures.html](http://www.vcdh.virginia.edu/PastsFutures.html). Although the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media at George Mason University was founded in 1994 and Ayers, himself a historian of slavery and the Civil War, wrote this essay in 1999, digital humanities as a field grew increasingly institutionalized primarily in the last two decades. In 2001 the first Digital Humanities Summer Institute was launched in Victoria, British Columbia; in 2002 HASTAC (Humanities, Arts, Science, and Technology Alliance and Collaboratory) was founded; in 2005, the Alliance of Digital Humanities Organizations was founded in Victoria, British Columbia.

38. #transformDH Collective, "About." See also Bailey, "#Transform(ing) DH Writing and Research"; Barnett et al., "QueerOS"; Barnett, "Brave Side of Digital Humanities"; Lothian and Phillips, "Can Digital Humanities Mean Transformative Critique?"; Cong-Huyen, "#CESA2013"; Cong-Huyen, "#mla13"; and Bailey, "All the Digital Humanists Are White."

39. See Nakamura and Chow-White, *Race after the Internet*.

40. McPherson, "Why Are the Digital Humanities So White?," 154. See also HASTAC, "About HASTAC," [www.hastac.org/about-hastac](http://www.hastac.org/about-hastac) (accessed 26 July 2018); Gold and Klein, *Debates in the Digital Humanities*; *Postcolonial Digital Humanities*, founded by Adeline Koh and Roopika Risam ([dhpoco.org](http://dhpoco.org)); Center for Solutions to Online Violence ([femtechnet.org/csov/](http://femtechnet.org/csov/)).

41. Conley, "Decoding Black Feminist Hashtags"; Wade, "'New Genres of Being Human'; Jackson, Bailey, and Foucault Welles, "#GirlsLikeUs."

42. On the challenges facing users on social media and the relationship between social media, algorithms, and corporate media, see Harry, "Everyone Watches"; Crockett, "Raving Amazons"; Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression*; and Browne, *Dark Matters*.

43. King, "Multiple Jeopardy"; Harry, "Everyone Watches"; Crockett, "Raving Amazons."

44. See "Power and Control Wheel," "Respect Wheel," "Social Media Ethics Handout," and "Power and Respect Handout" created by the Digital Alchemists (Bianca Laureano, I'Nasah Crockett, Maegan Ortiz, Jessica Marie Johnson, Sydette Harry, Izetta Mobley, and Danielle Cole) and designed by Liz Andrade, hosted in PDF format by the Center for Solutions to Online Violence ([femtechnet.org/csov/](http://femtechnet.org/csov/)).

45. On infrapolitics, see Kelley, *Race Rebels*. See also Freelon et al., "Black Twitter and Other Social Media Communities."

46. Johnson and Neal, "Introduction."

47. Fogel and Engerman, *Time on the Cross*.

48. Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, 18.

49. This article's focus is slavery's archive, but the commodification, enumeration, and erasure of nonwhite bodies through carceral practices (like slavery) should not be limited to the period of Atlantic slaving. For recent work on the carceral (with a US focus), see Sharpe, *In the Wake*; Browne, *Dark Matters*; LeFlouria, *Chained in Silence*; and Haley, *No Mercy Here*.

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