Introduction: Digital History in African Studies

Jennifer Hart

Abstract: This brief introduction to a special section on Digital History in African Studies situates three articles on recent digital humanities initiatives among African historians within the broader histories of the use of digital methodologies in the study of Africa. In particular, it highlights the way that Africanist digital scholarship sits at the intersection of digital historical representation, community engagement, and academic research. While Africanist digital history builds on the work of a much broader digital humanities community, historians of Africa also draw on their discipline's long history of methodological innovation to raise important questions about the potential contributions and limitations of digital technologies in academic research.

Résumé: Cette courte introduction à cette section spéciale porte sur la place de l'histoire numérique dans les études africaines et situe les trois articles parmi les initiatives récentes en humanités numériques adoptées par les historiens de l'Afrique qui utilisent des méthodologies numériques pour l'étude de l'Afrique. Cette introduction souligne tout particulièrement la façon dont le travail scientifique numérique sur l'Afrique se situe à l'intersection de la représentation historique et numérique, de l'engagement des communautés étudiées et de la recherche universitaire. Alors que l'histoire numérique africaniste s'appuie sur le travail d'une communauté des humanités numériques beaucoup plus large, les historiens de l'Afrique s'appuient également sur la longue histoire d'innovation méthodologique de leur discipline pour soulever des questions importantes sur les contributions et les limites potentielles des technologies numériques dans la recherche universitaire.

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Anchored by the early advances of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database (now Voyages),[1] much of the application of digital tools to historical research in and about Africa has been dominated by the creation and analysis of digital archives. And, of that, a disproportionate amount of the scholarship has addressed the methodological questions associated with the study of the trans-Atlantic slave trade.[2] Importantly, these archival projects placed Africanists at the center of DH debates about data sourcing, representation, analysis, and access.

Particularly in light of persistent challenges to processing and preserving archival materials on the continent, digital archiving projects are likely to increase in number in the foreseeable future, and forthcoming issues of this journal will once again take up questions of digital archives. The papers presented here, however, feature projects that explore other possibilities of digital scholarship. In particular, many historians have also begun embracing the possibilities of the digital not merely to archive but also to create what Theimer calls "digital historical representations."[3] While these projects often include some form of archiving, they also take a step beyond the digitized archive, using digital sources to create interactive historical experiences and make historical arguments. In doing so, these scholars are part of a long tradition in Africanist scholarship, which embraces new methodological practices to rethink what it means to "do history."

Some of these projects use existing digital technologies – from "mining" social media to blogging to historical mapping – to bring new voices and perspectives into the popular and scholarly conversation about the African past. Others use their projects as platforms for new kinds of sensory and

[1] Voyages: The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, https://www.slavevoyages.org/about/about, accessed 31 July 2019.

[2] Most recently in this journal, see: Henry B. Lovejoy, Paul E. Lovejoy, Walter Hawthorne, Edward A. Alpers, Mariana Candido and Matthew S. Hopper, "Redefining African Regions for Linking Open-Source Data," *History in Africa* 46 (2019), 5–36. See also, for example: Paul Lovejoy, "The Upper Guinea Coast and the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database," *African Economic History* 38 (2010), 1–27; G. Ugo Nwokeji and David Eltis, "The Roots of the African Diaspora: Methodological Considerations in the Analysis of Names in the Liberated African Registers of Sierra Leone and Havana," *History in Africa* 29 (2002), 365–379.

[3] Kate Theimer, "A Distinction Worth Exploring: 'Archives' and 'Digital Historical Representations,'" *Journal of Digital Humanities* 3–2 (2014), http://journalofdigitalhumanities.org/3–2/a-distinction-worth-exploring-archives-and-digital-historical-representations/, accessed 31 July 2019. The *Voyages* project itself also demonstrates a move in this direction, with new forms of data visualization integrated into the 2019 update. See: Henry Louis Gates' introduction to Voyages 2.0 on the website: https://www.slavevoyages.org/

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spatial analysis in historical scholarship, and, in the process, are often creating new kinds of technology and software that make their analysis possible. Still others are dedicated to rethinking how we teach African history, both inside and outside of the continent. At a time when the *Economist* argues, "mobile phones are transforming Africa," these digital projects provide a new way for scholars to engage with a broad-based public.[4] Public-facing projects not only encourage citizens to consume material on their sites, but, in many cases, they also actively encourage people to participate in building their content and analysis.

These projects are all informed by the methodological, technological, and ethical considerations raised by earlier digital scholarship, as well as the debates about decolonization and intersectionality that are reshaping both African Studies and Digital Humanities.[5] By engaging in public scholarship, these digital history projects help rethink long-standing concerns among Africanist scholars about the politics of knowledge production and the repatriation of scholarly materials. These projects are often highly collaborative and involve partnerships within and outside of the continent. However, they also raise new kinds of concerns about access, privilege, and representation. The high costs of these projects mean that they are often funded through US and European institutions, replicating a model of research support on the continent more broadly. But digital projects also require

[4] "Mobile Phones are Transforming Africa," *The Economist* (10 December 2016), https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2016/12/10/mobile-phones-are-transforming-africa, accessed 31 July 2019.

[5] See, for example: Roopika Risam, *New Digital Worlds: Postcolonial Digital Humanities in Theory, Praxis, and Pedagogy* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 2018); Elizabeth Losh and Jacqueline Wernimont (eds.), *Bodies of Information: Intersectional Feminism and the Digital Humanities* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019); Dorothy Kim and Jesse Stommel (eds.), *Disrupting the Digital Humanities* (New York: Punctum Press, 2018); Matthew K. Gold and Lauren F. Klein (eds.), *Debates in the Digital Humanities 2019* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019); Jean Allman, "Kwame Nkrumah, African Studies, and the Politics of Knowledge Production in the Black Star of Africa," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 46–2 (2013), 181–203; Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, "African Studies and Universities Since Independence," *Transition* 101 (2009), 110–135; Mahmood Mamdani, "Between the Public Intellectual and the Scholar: Decolonization and Some Post-Independence Initiatives in African Higher Education," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 17–1 (2016), 68–83; The Rhodes Must Fall Movement, *Rhodes Must Fall: The Struggle to Decolonize the Racist Heart of Empire* (London: Zed Books, 2018); Achille Mbembe, "Decolonizing Knowledge and the Question of the Archive" (Africa is a Country: E-book, 2015), https://africaisacountry.atavist.com/decolonizing-knowledge-and-the-question-of-the-archive, accessed 31 July 2019; Francis B. Nyamnjoh, "Decolonizing the University in Africa," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia, Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), https://oxfordre.com/politics/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.001.0001/acrefore–9780190228637-e–717, accessed 31 July 2019.

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server space and hosting, as well as ongoing web maintenance to stay active – support that often requires additional investment and support. While South African universities have been building their own digital humanities infrastructure over the last several years, digital humanities centers are currently heavily concentrated in the US and Europe.[6] New centers opening in Nigeria face ongoing funding and resource challenges, which inhibit digital scholarship.

Even as digital scholarship on and in Africa expands, it often seems disconnected from both the scholarly commitments and digital communities of those on and off of the continent. As the 2019 Digital Humanities Conference's "focus on Africa" made clear, conversations about DH in Africa are still unduly focused on the kinds of capacity building that leads to the development of DH centers, institutes, and programs, while ignoring more fundamental questions of representation, inclusion, and access.[7] What does it mean to develop digital humanities programs on a continent where internet costs are higher and speeds are slower than global averages?[8] What does digital humanities look like in countries where individuals are far more likely to access the internet via mobile phones than broadband hookups?[9] As the projects presented here make clear, these conditions do not preclude the development of digital humanities projects in African contexts. They do, however, raise questions about the biases of funding structures, the limitations of institution-building, and the importance of community engagement and partnerships.

These papers, then, are not intended to represent the breadth and complexity of the field of Africanist digital history, if we could call it such. It is, however, instructive to think about what they do represent. These projects are three examples of an emerging form of engagement in the digital humanities among Africanists; they are new forms of digital historical representation, community engagement, and academic research that blur the boundaries between public history, digital humanities, and more traditional forms of historical scholarship. Two of these three projects have been developed outside of major digital humanities centers, driven by the research and pedagogical interests of individual faculty members and graduate students. They are part of an emerging conversation about public-facing

[6] See, for example, the list of member organizations of the Alliance of Digital Humanities Organizations (ADHO), http://adho.org/about

[7] "Focus on Africa," *DH2019*, https://dh2019.adho.org/programme/focus-on-africa/, accessed 31 July 2019.

[8] Yomi Kazeem, *Quartz* (14 September 2018), https://qz.com/africa/1390318/africa-has-the-most-expensive-internet-in-the-world/, accessed 31 July 2019.

[9] "Supporting Wireless Broadband in Africa," *International Finance Corporation: World Bank Group*, https://www.ifc.org/wps/wcm/connect/news_ext_content/ifc_external_corporate_site/news+and+events/news/wireless-broadband-africa, accessed 31 July 2019.

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scholarship and applied history as much as they are about digital humanities.[10] And, importantly, they provide us with accessible and thoughtful models for how to use digital tools to produce knowledge, disseminate research, analyze data, preserve historical materials, and engage the public, which could be incorporated into many different classrooms and research agendas.

If these papers are not intended to constitute a representative sample of the field, it is also important to think about what is left out and how this is shaped by the networks and institutional definitions that have come to dominate digital humanities broadly and digital history specifically. Some of the most interesting and publicly-engaged projects on the continent have been created and are operating outside of academic networks, driven by the efforts of young Africans to document, learn from, and celebrate the past. In Ghana, for example, The Nana Project encourages individuals to become citizen historians by collecting oral histories from community elders in order to preserve and expand knowledge of the nation's recent history. Other projects like Accra We Dey are not explicitly historical but they do draw heavily on history to raise awareness of the cultural and historical richness of Accra's indigenous Ga community. These kinds of projects often blur the boundaries between commercial and academic, entrepreneurial and philanthropic, private projects and public interest. They often rely heavily on social media, and they are connected to broader networks within their respective countries and throughout the diaspora. And yet, they remain largely excluded from institutionalized academic conversations and networks in the digital humanities.

In thinking about what these three papers include and what they exclude, then, we can see the emergence of what might be a critical agenda for Digital History in African Studies. What does such a field look like? What kinds of questions should we be asking ourselves in order to ensure that digital scholarship is used in such a way that we can expand access rather than limit it? What kinds of issues are raised when digital scholarship is practiced in an African context that might otherwise be overlooked in broader digital humanities conversations and networks? What happens when historical questions are separated out from inherently interdisciplinary projects? And where/how can we write about the methodological considerations at the core of this broad range of Africanist digital scholarship that include non-academic practitioners and engage both African Studies and Digital Humanities audiences?

[10] Trevor R. Getz, Lindsay Ehrisman and Tony Yeboah, "'We Should Have Maintained This Unity, Then There Would Be More Development:' Lessons from a Pop-Up Museum of the Fante Confederation," *History in Africa* 46 (2019), 195–216.

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