New World: The Impact of Digitization on the Study of Slavery

Britt Rusert*

Last year, an interactive animation of the Atlantic slave trade went viral.1 Provocatively titled “The Atlantic Slave Trade in Two Minutes,” the interactive map first appeared as part of Slate’s online course “The History of American Slavery,” relying on the voyages cataloged in the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database to visualize the crossing of 15,790 slave ships from Africa to the New World from 1545 to 1860. The visualization is a powerful one. Slate reported that it was the fourth most shared story on its site in 2015 (Hassler). It’s teachable; it travels easily. But beyond the consensus regarding the power and pedagogical usefulness of this animated map, “The Atlantic Slave Trade in Two Minutes” raises important questions about the place of such digital projects in the study of slavery itself.

Animated maps like “The Atlantic Slave Trade in Two Minutes,” alongside a growing number of digital archives, databases, and other digitization projects focused on slavery, are transforming how scholars study both the history and literature of enslavement. For literary scholars, the digitization of this archive offers unprecedented access to new texts whose forms may even change how we understand the literary archive of enslavement itself. Furthermore, while literary studies has historically stuck close to the slave narrative tradition, scholars are finding themselves inundated with new records and documentation that are changing the disciplinary boundaries between literary and historical approaches.

*Britt Rusert is an Assistant Professor in the W. E. B. Du Bois Department of Afro-American Studies at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. She is the author of Fugitive Science: Empiricism and Freedom in Early African American Culture (NYUP, 2017) and co-creator of a digital teaching edition of William J. Wilson’s “Afric-American Picture Gallery” for Just Teach One: Early African American Print.

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This abundance has resulted in more conversation between historians and literary scholars as well as a return to more historicist approaches to African American writing. But it also raises questions about what, precisely, now characterizes the literary history of slavery. In considering the impact of the digitization of slavery in literary studies, this essay reflects on conversations about slavery and the archive in light of the digital turn. It engages in a reading of “The Atlantic Slave Trade in Two Minutes” to consider what this particular visualization makes possible and what it obscures, and it argues that the forms of ephemerality worrying scholars in the digital age have actually proved central to the forms, politics, and transmissions of black writing since the early nineteenth century.

While the perspective of those designing and building digital archives and projects is crucial, literary scholars should be also thinking about how access to digital resources is changing literary historiography. Digital humanists, for example, have become increasingly reflexive about the significance and effect of digitization on how scholars read, interpret, and write. Since research across fields and specializations increasingly relies on digital content, it behooves all scholars to be more explicit about the use of such resources in their work. Scholars might further think more carefully about how digitization transforms slavery’s status as a particular—even peculiar—object of knowledge within and beyond literary studies.

1. Rethinking Slavery’s Archive

A growing number of digital sources on slavery are becoming available to scholars, a heterogeneous and largely decentralized set of digital texts, maps, exhibits, and projects dispersed across different platforms and different intellectual and institutional networks. Mapping and data visualization projects help users envision hidden regimes of violence and power, as well as obscured patterns of movement, migration, and escape in slavery and postslavery contexts. Libraries are making collections on slavery and slave resistance accessible to a broader academic and public audience through various online archives and databases. Documenting the American South (DocSouth) remains a tried-and-true resource for electronic editions of slave narratives, as well as proslavery and antislavery literature across the US South. At the same time, a growing number of digital archives focus on the transnational dimensions of slavery. Activist-minded projects are making important connections between histories of antislavery organizing and on-the-ground social justice
work today, while working on the integration of such digital projects into both high school and college curriculums. Digital archives are also making new additions to the corpus of available slave narratives, while transforming the very definition of the slave narrative. For example, while DocSouth’s “North American Slave Narratives” catalogs actual narratives written by former slaves, another database, Slave Biographies: The Atlantic Database Network, takes a more data-centered approach to the lives of enslaved people. Slave Biographies allows users to search datasets generated from “archives, courthouses, churches, government offices, museums, ports, and private collections” to gain information about slaves in colonial Louisiana and Brazil. While this repository offers important information about enslaved people, including rare records about disease and illness, it is not clear why such records should be called “slave biographies.” This database thus raises questions about how more quantitative approaches, and a turn to data more generally through digitization, may transform how we understand a genre like the slave narrative. Even the older “North American Slave Narratives” database, which allows users to search the narratives with keyword searches and even download the full text of the collection, may enable more “big data” approaches to the slave narrative tradition, ones that, for example, emphasize the interconnectedness of different narratives reflected in shared keywords rather than the distinctions among different texts made visible through close reading.

In addition to raising important questions about the black literary canon in pre-1900 contexts and how it should be analyzed, the digitization of slavery may also contribute to those conversations about slavery and the archive that have defined the field for the past two decades. The study of slavery today has been deeply influenced by a genealogy of scholarship that has theorized the question and indeed the problem of the archive given the monumental dispossession and violence of New World slavery. Saidiya Hartman has poignantly written about the impossibilities of recovering the voices of African captives from ship ledgers, plantation records, and colonial/master records in Lose Your Mother (2007) and “Venus in Two Acts” (2008). In his influential 1997 study, anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot looked to the silences, elisions, and ellipses in histories of the Haitian Revolution, and adjacent archives of settler colonialism, to analyze the place of power in historical narratives about the past. More recently, Simon Gikandi has conceived of the archive of the Atlantic as a crypt as well as a space of “pure negativity” (86), while the slavemaster’s archive is understood as one of a “will to power” and even a “form of violent control” (92). Taken together, this genealogy understands the archive of slavery as
fundamentally marked by loss, fragmentation, transience, and perhaps, above all else, a profound, irreparable violence. Scholars of the Black Atlantic thus tend to focus more on reckoning with the fragments of the past, rather than on repairing or recuperating history. For Jennifer Morgan, this profound regime of historical violence means that scholars who work on the history of enslaved peoples have a “relationship to research that positions us always on the brink of breakthrough and breakdown” (154). Approaching the archive with suspicion, hesitancy, frustration, and disappointment, scholars of enslavement are constantly aware of the forms of power that silence and distort the voices of the dispossessed. And yet the archive is still considered as “home to the counternarrative, or at least to its possibility” (Morgan 154).8

A related body of scholarship focusing more specifically on the relationship between coloniality and the archive has been influenced by Jacques Derrida’s account of the archive as at once commencement and commandment, Gayatri Spivak’s thesis about the (un)representability of the subaltern, as well as Michel Foucault’s writings on the archive and the statement, the power/knowledge nexus, and the colonial organization of knowledge in the episteme of modernity. Recalling Derrida on the Greek arkheion—the archive as a domicile, a house, a residence of the superior magistrates, the archons, a place—this genealogy of scholarship theorizes the archive’s relationship to institutions and to regimes of coloniality (2). Work by Ann Laura Stoler has challenged how we understand the nature of colonial power and governance by reading the documents of colonial archives as ones that actually reflect profound instability and anxiety over how to manage colonial populations. A renewed focus on the archive has also shaped recent scholarship on African American literature, especially in the era before the New Negro Renaissance. Many scholars of early African American literature have begun to move away from studies that focus on individual authors and individual texts to clear space for an analysis of the broader print sphere in which African Americans published. This development, drawing some of its energy from scholarship on US print cultures and book history, as well as a long history of recovery work in black literary studies, focuses on the abundance of African American writing across multiple genres and media. Rather than fetishizing the slave narrative, it turns to the multiple formats in which African Americans wrote, including newspapers, magazines, pamphlets, broadsides, and several even more ephemeral forms.9

These genealogies of scholarship on the archive might be brought into closer conversation in order to yield new insights and make blind spots discernible. For example, a certain utopianism in black recovery work often disregards the postcolonialist emphasis
on the archive’s relationship to institutions, as well as how archives encode and produce particular forms of power. How, for example, do we understand the politics of the black print archive if it is indeed true that the archive is, in Foucault’s terms, a law that determines and limits what can be said? At the same time, critical accounts of Atlantic slavery and the archive that traffic in the language of fragmentation and loss could use further nuance in conversation with librarian and archivist accounts of the contingencies of collection and preservation. How, for example, do we understand the specificities of fragmentation and loss in the archive of slavery given the incompleteness of all historical knowledge? Does the fragmented record of enslavement reflect the losses of history more generally, as well as the specific losses and violences of enslavement? Or perhaps the point is that all modern archives are marked by slavery. Finally, the politics and historical specificities of preserving black archival collections may help challenge frameworks like “preservation through neglect” that archivists discuss (Rosenzweig 321). In other words, normative discourses of document “neglect” may be reframed in light of regimes of dispossession and racism that have historically made captive archives deemed unworthy of preservation. Moreover, the historical undervaluing of African American records is exacerbated by the overrepresentation of racist collections in library archives, including the prominence of minstrelsy in theater and drama collections. Recent projects to digitize racist texts from the nineteenth century include reflexivity about the politics of making such content available online, but they don’t always ask questions about the (postbellum, Jim Crow, and post–Jim Crow) histories that led to the inventoriedling of racist texts in the first place.10

Beyond access to more content, digital archives are poised to make important contributions to the scholarship on slavery and the archive. A growing number of digitization projects related to the history of slavery, from older databases like the “North American Slave Narratives” and the *Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database* to newer, smaller-scale, carefully curated projects like Vincent Brown’s animated map, *Slave Revolt in Jamaica, 1760–1761*, and more experimental, interactive collections like Elizabeth Dillon and Nicole Aljoe’s *The Early Caribbean Digital Archive*, not only provide access to new content, but also make arguments through scholarly introductions and other textual apparatuses, through the particular arrangement and organization of knowledge, and through design itself.11 If we take seriously the afterlives of slavery thesis—that slavery continues to reverberate into the present socioeconomically as well as in terms of the production of subjectivities—then we should consider how the legacies of slavery interact with and are possibly even shaped by digital media.
The digitization of slavery’s archive especially lends itself to further exploration into the gaps, silences, and violence that mark the archive of slavery. I, for one, am curious how such dynamics are migrated, interpreted, illuminated, yet perhaps also obscured in digital projects related to slavery. As Dillon has observed, The Early Caribbean Digital Archive is interested in “remixing” texts from the early Caribbean to reflect on and potentially unsettle the power dynamics of the colonial archive, turning to form and design to engage in an anticolonial archival practice (“Radical Archiving”). Similarly, Lauren Klein uses the specific silences around James Hemings in the Jefferson Papers Online to reflect on how digital humanities (DH) tools and techniques might render the silences and make visible the “mysteries” in slavery’s archive. DH tools may well illuminate the “mysteries” and “ghosts” of slavery’s archive, but they also transform how we come to understand, see, and read slavery itself. Digitization promises to “deform” slavery’s archive as much as it offers new insight into the contents of that archive. Slavery’s archive has also continued to accrete, transform, and bear the imprints of time as well as subsequent regimes of forced labor and migration that persist into the twenty-first century; it thus will continue to change in light of its archiving online. Stoler has cogently written on the deferred temporalities of the colonial archive, in which forms of administrative documentation do not become accessible until they become salient for an emerging colonial ordinance, situation, or crisis (14). In this regard, archives of slavery and colonialism are always archives of the (digital) present, as much as they are archives of the past.

DH and new media scholars are already aware that digital sources require analysis and interpretation just like other texts and cultural artifacts. Publications like Digital Humanities Quarterly and the Journal of Digital Humanities routinely feature critical analyses and interpretations of digital archives, databases, and projects of all kinds. The rise of “digital literary studies” includes both the development of tools and other digital resources along with a set of reading practices for understanding digital media and texts. But scholars outside the digital humanities can also benefit from foregrounding their use of digital sources and resources. For example, what would it mean for scholars to be more reflexive and transparent about their use of digital sources and archives in their articles, books, and other works of scholarship, especially those appearing in print-based forms? The current rise in interest in African American print cultures has surely been driven, at least in part, by increased access to new texts and relevant collections of material online. As Joycelyn Moody and Howard Rambsy II note in a recent African American Print Cultures special issue of MELUS: “Not
coincidentally, the increasing interest in print matters are intensifying at the exact moment that digital materials offer alternatives to conventional books and opportunities to access rare and previously hard to reach texts online” (4). But scholarship on black print cultures, while often depending on digitization projects, frequently pushes this important fact to the background: it pays more attention to the material history of old books, pamphlets, newspapers, and other print artifacts, rather than to the new media—equally material—that increasingly make histories of the book possible.

Increased access to materials from the early African American print sphere may also contribute to a dynamic in which the writings of free people come to stand in for both the archives and the voices of the enslaved. Growing access to African American newspapers, pamphlets, ephemera, and other forms of print online will surely offer new insight into, for example, the history and literatures of nineteenth-century abolitionism, black religious communities, and black organizational activity; but digitization does not necessarily enable more access to the perspectives and stories of the enslaved. The voices of the enslaved may be spectrally encoded in black print, but there are many mediations between the writing of a former slave like Frederick Douglass and the experience of a chattel slave on a cotton plantation in Louisiana, or the young girls and women, killed in transit from Africa to the New World, to whom Hartman attends in her essay “Venus in Two Acts.” It’s not likely that increased access to digital records will significantly contribute to greater access to the “voices” of the enslaved. Even collections that make available runaway slave notices, plantation records, and other documents of slavery add but one more layer of mediation between the scholar/listener and slavery’s archive, through the process of digitization itself. According to Hartman, we will still need methods of “critical fabulation” to tell the stories of the enslaved (11). No amount of digital work will ever redress that history or that loss.

2. “The Atlantic Slave Trade in Two Minutes”: A Reading

It may be true that slavery’s archive is constituted by fragments, silences, and acts of violence, but these may be harder to see in an age when more and more resources are available online. How do we understand an archive marked by loss, violence, and death that increasingly presents itself as an abundance, or even, in Rosenzweig’s terms, as a digital superabundance? Especially at the writing stage, it’s tempting to quickly and conveniently mine digital archives for what is useful for the project or argument at hand. But at least as a start, scholars would benefit from slowing down and
thinking carefully about our use of digital sources on slavery, even as we turn our critical acumen and reading techniques to the digital interfaces, design, projects, and visualizations upon which our scholarship increasingly depends.

Consider the following experiment in reading “The Atlantic Slave Trade in Two Minutes.” This animated map visualizes the slave trade as a series, and at the peak of the trade, as a swarm, of black dots in motion, set against a background map of the Atlantic World as it is usually imagined and visualized, composed of the continental coordinates of Africa, Europe, South America, and North America (see Figure 1). The Slate map has at least two direct antecedents: a set of maps of the slave trade on the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database website, and David Eltis and David Richardson’s 2010 print volume, Atlas of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, whose maps were “constructed from a set of estimates derived from the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database as it existed in January 2008—almost a year before the launch of the Voyages Web site” (xxiv). These earlier iterations of maps derived from the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database are a reminder of the important continuities between the “age of print” and the “digital age.” Relatedly, they also entail a warning that snazzy digital animations and maps can sometimes appear as artifacts strangely unfettered from the world of scholarship, from earlier histories of visualization in print and online, and ironically in the cases of visualizations that are meant to shed light on historical contexts, even from history itself. According to the narrative accompanying the Slate visualization:

The dots—which represent individual slave ships—also correspond to the size of each voyage. The larger the dot, the more enslaved people on board. And if you pause the map and click on a dot, you’ll learn about the ship’s flag—was it British? Portuguese? French?—its origin point, its destination, and its history in the slave trade.

Pausing the animation and clicking on a black dot also allows users to link to the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database entry for that particular slave ship voyage. My thoughts below should not be taken as a critique of this particular project, for I agree with the consensus that this is a well-designed and powerful visualization. Rather, I sketch a brief interpretation of the animation—a preliminary analysis of what this particular data visualization illuminates, and what it obscures—in order to think critically about how digital projects create particular imaginaries of slavery itself.

One of the most striking aspects of “The Atlantic Slave Trade in Two Minutes” is the way that the small black dots that represent
individual slave ships appear as if they are being thrown or even catapulted from West Africa to the Americas; but it’s not clear who or what is doing the catapulting. With slave traders, slave ports, and settlers absented from the graphic representation, it’s as if a series of “invisible hands” operate the trade. The ghostly, agent-less launching of slave ships from Africa to the Americas nicely captures how discourses of trade routinely obscured the brutalities of the slave trade: the commodification of people hidden under mercantilist discourses of profit, calculation, and markets, as well as the processes of mystification involved with the creation of commodities themselves. This particular aspect of the animation also signifies on Olaudah Equiano’s perception that the slave ship was operated by magic in his retelling of being kidnapped and stolen to the New World as a child. The discourse of magic in Equiano’s Middle Passage account signifies in multiple ways in the world of the narrative: it speaks to the perspective of a child being taken captive; to the “magical” qualities of commodity fetishism in the context of a global capitalism increasingly reliant on the commodification of Africans; and to the need among slavers and sailors to control captives and prevent rebellion by obscuring the technologies and technical knowledges central to the slave trade, especially the navigation of slave ships. Later on in life, Equiano finds that a
knowledge of navigation will become central to seizing his freedom (76–78). In “The Atlantic Slave Trade in Two Minutes,” the obscuring of navigation, and knowledge of it, is signaled through ships that sail themselves across the Atlantic Ocean. At the same time, the representation of slave ships—as black dots—moving across the map without the colonial actors, sailors, buyers, traders, and other agents that made the trade happen on a day-to-day basis, presents an image of Africa that gives itself and its people freely to the world: an odd image of self-sacrifice that obscures the extraction of people and resources, as well as its attendant violence on the people stolen and the people and communities left behind.

Significantly, one can stop, or pause, the animation, a feature scarcely available to captive people, but that allows users to slow down and critically reflect on the meanings, implications, and assumptions embedded in this particular representation of the slave trade. There is much more to say about those black dots and their self-propelling movement across the animation’s map. For example, these dots that “jump” across the Atlantic link to Stephanie Smallwood’s observation that while slave ships moved back and forth (something that is discernible not from the visualization, but from the data that accompanies it), “human commodities followed a relentlessly linear course: the direction of their transatlantic movement never reversed. Ships traced circles. Commodities traveled in a straight line” (6). Thus, the unidirectionality of the animation powerfully represents the passage of commodities, not people. The map thus represents the logic and perspective of the slavers, not the newly enslaved. From the perspective of the captives, the Middle Passage was a traumatic, directionless experience; it was not really a “passage” at all. Even for captured Africans who had a sense of a broader Atlantic world, especially after centuries of European occupation of their lands, captives usually did not know their ultimate destination or direction. According to Smallwood, the ship itself “produced in them an experience of motion without discernible direction or destination” (122). Moreover, from the perspective of Africans, the slave trade was not composed of “straight lines” or “black arrows,” but of a vortex that pulled vulnerable, dispossessed people on the continent (those most vulnerable to capture and enslavement) into distant markets across the ocean. That vortex dynamic—and the visual imaginary that accompanies it—also glimpses how the slave trade, as drain or vacuum, produced mass depopulation that devastated local economies across African regions and emerging states.15

Temporality was also experienced differently for different agents, including traders, buyers, sailors, and captives.16 The animation tracks the passage of time year by year so that one
can pause the animation to have a closer look at any year’s slave voyages, an interesting feature that bears reflection from a historical, literary, and philosophical perspective. (What does it mean to “freeze” or “pause” the relentlessly repetitive, seemingly endless cycles of the slave trade?) But the time coordinates of the animation seem less able to capture the alternative temporalities of the trade, including the excruciating experience of being in the hold.

This is also where the quick, “jumping” nature of the dots becomes a more complicated issue, especially given the length of transatlantic slave voyages, which could last from three weeks to several months. Given the high mortality rates on the ships, the regimes of violence and terror found there, and the conditions for enslaved people, it’s not clear how we can even begin to visualize the subjective experience of “captive time” on the slave ship: the fear, anxiety, confusion, illness, despair, and death that necessarily shaped the experience of time on the slave ship. Walter Johnson has also written about the “First Passage” from interior spaces in Africa to coastal slave castles/ports that often preceded captives’ forced migration to the New World; in addition to contributing to the captives’ “understanding of what it was that was happening, their emotional condition going into the journey, and their ability to survive it,” the “First Passage” contributed to the length of the passage itself (“Time and Revolution” 150). Moreover, as Johnson has asked in another context, how does one account for the temporalities of terror within the slave market, how to understand temporality in the context of people standing at the auction block who may have feared this moment for their whole lives (Soul by Soul 14)? How to mark the time of being separated from lovers and other loved ones? How to mark the passage of time that feels like an eternity for those being bought and sold? For Vincent Brown, “there are entire worlds that [these types of maps] cannot convey” (“Mapping a Slave Revolt” 138).

One might imagine how this visualization could accommodate a graphic representation of the trade that expresses something about how captives actually experienced the slave trade. In this way, scholarly readings and critique might further supplement and extend the lives of digital projects. Indeed, both iterative critique and redesign are necessary to engage new generations of digital users, especially given the often rapid obsolescence of digital technologies and interfaces, as well as critical directions in scholarship. Brown’s Slave Revolt in Jamaica project cannily supplements the mapped movements of insurgent slaves with excerpted narrative accounts of the revolt from the period. Literary scholars might point to narrative accounts that flesh out the “black arrows” and “black dots” of the slave trade’s logics and routes: Equiano’s firsthand account of the horrors of the slave hold or William Wells Brown’s firsthand
account of the internal US slave trade (something not represented in the *Slate* animation, or in the *Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database*). Scholars might also point to contemporary works of art and poetry that illuminate the repetitions/cycles of slavery that continue to shape and haunt the present, while reflecting on the seemingly endless repetitions of the trade and regimes of enslavement historically (Brown). There is also the more historical question of how the continual return of slave trips to the shores of America affected people who had already endured the long, torturous journey to the New World. Smallwood writes of the haunting imprint of the slave ship on New World slaves, an imprint that might be expressed through the representation of black dots lingering at the shores of the Caribbean and both North and South America, dots that represent the “afterimage” of the passage and its devastating imprint on memory and community. Smallwood’s account evokes how the slave ship, and the continual arrival of new African captives, were kinds of triggers that could retraumatize enslaved people. Can data visualizations capture such regimes of racial terror? If so, what would they look like?

Despite these possibilities for experimentation through project design and scholarly interpretation, both mapping and data visualization remain imbricated in the history of colonialism and enslavement. Dillon’s response to *Slave Revolt in Jamaica* reminds us that that mapping is itself a colonial activity. She writes, “the cartographic revolution at the origin of Western mapping methods is deeply allied with the colonization of the Americas and the exploitation of American land, indigenous peoples, and African labor”; the colonial history of mapping—and its attendant naturalization of space—makes digital mapping a particularly fraught activity (“By Design” 143). Lauren Klein has also warned that data visualizations of slavery’s archives are especially complicated since their tools and methods are embedded in a positivism and empirical naiveté that derives from the Age of Enlightenment. In her words, “we must ... recall the long, fraught history of visual display” (675). Klein notes that Jefferson’s own plantation account records relied on graphic representations of enslaved people and that Jefferson even shared a mentor with the founder of data visualization, the Scottish political economist William Playfair.

Similarly, Johanna Drucker has warned scholars about the uncritical uptake of data visualization in the humanities since these tools rely on conventions of the graphical representation of information borrowed from the social sciences and natural sciences. Even as data visualization projects often present interpretations as objective facts, they collapse observation with the phenomena observed, and they aim for a representational simplicity against which much
critical thinking in the humanities is opposed. In response, Drucker advocates for the development of humanities approaches to graphic display, approaches that would move graphical representation from certainty to ambiguity, from objectivity to subjectivity, and that would find “means of expressing interpretive complexity.” This self-proclaimed polemic seems especially relevant for data visualizations that seek to represent the complex histories of slavery. The kinds of permutations that Drucker experiments with in representing the relational and subjective dimensions of temporality and spatiality (rather than just the coordinates of time and space) further resonate with the deformations of both time and space in and beyond the hold of the slave ship. Representing time and space differently might also help visualize the “vortex” of the Atlantic that both Smallwood and Joseph Roach describe. The visual deformations that result from such graphical designs are also apt given the confluence of a discourse around “deformation” in both slavery studies and digital humanities.

In addition to humanities approaches integrated at the point of design and production, accounts of reception may also reveal the centrality of the observer/reader to the interpretation of graphical data. As a respondent to the “Atlantic Slave Trade in Two Minutes” on Metafilter provocatively commented, “If you let your eyes cross, just a little bit, you can see it as a spurting, gaping, mortal wound inflicted on the heart of Africa” (cacophonie). Other viewers reported feeling nauseated while watching the animation. That nausea might come from the sinking sense of the enormities and brutalities of the slave system, but it also expresses the seasickness, illness, and violent disorientations produced in the hold of the slave ship itself. In this way, these readers’ anecdotal responses suggest that the animated map has the potential to glimpse something of the nondirectionality, dislocations, and bewilderments of the slave trade, even with its depiction of the unidirectional flow of humans-as-commodities from Africa to the New World.

3. Digital Slavery in the Anthropocene

“The Atlantic Slave Trade in Two Minutes” spans four centuries: bound to the chronological limits of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database from which its data was generated, it visualizes slave ship voyages between 1545 and 1860. It does not track the post-1860 trade, nor does it visualize the subsequent forced migrations of Chinese contract labor to the New World that Lisa Lowe has recently chronicled, migrations that largely replaced, and were set in motion by, the abolition of slavery. Despite the historical and
geographical delimitations of the animation, this visualization still manages to glimpse future histories. For example, the accelerated speed of the animation—the quick movements of those black dots—recalls common visual representations of the twenty-first-century world as one of hyperconnection, made possible through the globalizing networks of capital, migration, and media, especially the Internet. Rather than reflecting the excruciating slowness of transatlantic voyages in the age of sail, its temporality seems to traffic in the accelerated temporalities of our (globalized, digital) present. In this way, the animation offers a graphic visualization of the slave trade refracted through the manipulation and speed of information flows that are integral to neoliberal imaginaries of the present. “The Atlantic Slave Trade in Two Minutes” glimpses the forms of forced labor and forced migration fueling a global capitalist economy, while marking the afterlives, or what Kimberly Juanita Brown terms the “afterimage” of Atlantic slavery in the present.

In her groundbreaking study of the interrelationships among Atlantic slavery, settler colonialism, regimes of Asian indenture, and forced migration, Lowe reads colonial state archives alongside liberal fiction and political philosophy to show how narratives of liberalism construct slavery as part of the past—they literally make slavery “history”—in order to elide the persistence of unfree labor in the present. I wonder to what extent digital projects and archives of slavery contribute to or possibly challenge liberalism’s disavowal of slavery’s presence and traces in the present. Do they help reveal the connections of slavery to the unfree present? Or do they disavow that connection to valorize liberal forms of unencumbered freedom?

Lowe’s account is perhaps most poignant in the way that her study chronicles the replacement of African slavery with Asian contract labor across the Atlantic world. She brings together colonial documentation from both the British West and East Indies to show that abolition was viewed by colonial agents as a way to increase profits in an age of diminishing returns in global markets and sites of production. Europeans thus turned to a cheaper source of labor in East Asia to increase profitability in a global system of trade and production. Despite the appearance of Chinese “coolie” laborers on plantations and other New World sites of production beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, this is a labor system and set of forced migrations that we have only just begun to visualize in the scholarly and cultural imaginary, let alone in digital formats.

Lowe’s integration of the Black Atlantic with the Asian Atlantic through global shifts in labor is further instructive for thinking through the labor politics of slavery’s digitization. Indeed, the notion of “digital slavery” takes on a whole new set of meanings when we refocus our attention on the forms of exploited, global
labor (and in the case of something like *Google Books*, incarcerated labor) that help enable scholarly access to expanding archives online. Designers of various archives are beginning to address these questions in creative and interesting ways, but scholars using digital archives and other resources should also think about how their use of digital projects and databases accounts for the various levels of invisible labor that make them possible. For example, scholarship might explore the labor that built these archives in the essays, books, and other scholarly works produced with these sites, whose trace remains in the spectral fingers periodically scanned in *Google Books*. Of course, the invisibility of digital labor is particularly ironic in the contexts of projects recounting the stories of enslaved labor. While many scholars of Atlantic slavery have rightly been reluctant to collapse slavery with contemporary forms of trafficking and forced labor, here the production of knowledge relies quite literally on neoliberal global capital’s networks of multinational labor and exploitation. Since the history of slavery is also a history of racialized labor exploitation, scholars must think more carefully about the systems of labor that undergird our expanding access to slavery’s archive online. Furthermore, scholars of enslavement, and in race and ethnic studies more broadly, might lead the way in incorporating analyses of digital labor into scholarship that relies on digital content and interfaces.

To conclude, I return to “The Atlantic Slave Trade in Two Minutes” one final time. Those black dots that represent individual slave ships also look like a pestilent swarm that recalls the Columbian exchange and the diseases that ravaged indigenous peoples through the routes and contacts of European imperialism. That “swarm” also calls to mind contemporary warnings about declining honeybee populations as well as concomitant discourses about the Anthropocene. Fantasies about the endless accumulation of data online ignore the forms of labor and material infrastructure upon which such accumulation depends, but they also disregard real environmental realities, including the fact that climate catastrophe may begin to disrupt constant and unlimited access to digital archives, data, and worlds. The resurfing interest in book history approaches is especially interesting given that libraries are increasingly thinking about how to preserve the print archive in an era of increasingly common severe weather events. Natural disasters are already changing priorities for collection and preservation. Private collectors have transferred ownership of private collections to institutions and libraries better equipped to protect print materials. Poet Jerry W. Ward Jr. has recently written about how Hurricane Katrina swept away his passion for collecting black poetry and the many reprints of black literature produced during the Black Arts Movement. In an age of
climate change that disproportionately affects marginalized populations, catastrophe and loss continue to structure postslavery archives, as well as their collection and preservation.

The contemporary moment is thus marked by the potential destabilization or “becoming ephemeral” of all archives. In Thomas Augst’s terms, in the digital age, “the very presence and shape of the historical archive have become newly protean” (20). What does this mean for African American literary history, and for US literary history more broadly? For one, it may mean shifting critical and pedagogical frameworks that better highlight histories and conditions of ephemerality in African American literature. Think, for example, about the power of the pamphlet form for someone like David Walker to reach a wide audience in the North and to spread his seditious message to slaves as well as black sailors; or, as Meredith McGill has described, how Frances Harper’s pamphlet poetry collections allowed her to connect poetry to activism.19 And just as earlier histories of black print culture used ephemeral forms to link print to on-the-ground organizing, contemporary black digital communities also revel in the possibilities of nonpermanence. In writing about the politics of deletion in black queer feminist organizing online, Jessica Marie Johnson describes a series of collectives—stitched together across blogs, websites, and various social media platforms—that often come together to forge something in a particular moment or set out to respond to a specific event, but may be deleted when they cease to be useful. At the same time, there’s always the possibility that someone will come along and resuscitate past efforts. Consider the twenty-first-century digital afterlives of Barbara Smith and Audre Lorde’s Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press in projects like Alexis Pauline Gumbs’s brokenbeautiful press (Johnson and Nuñez). Thus, rather than worrying about the losses of history or aspiring to an impossible completeness in the archive, these scholars reflect on the fragments and the wreckage of the past, while asking how those fragments might be used in the present for a different future.

Notes

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64–72, on how the search function has shaped and transformed humanities research for the past two decades, though the phenomenon has gone largely unnoticed.

3. Although there is not yet a centralized bibliography on digital archives on slavery, on #ADPhD (africandiasporaphd.com), Jessica Marie Johnson collects and showcases scholarship in Atlantic African Diaspora Studies, including a number of digital projects and archives concentrating on Atlantic slavery.

4. See, for example, digital projects like Slave Revolt in Jamaica, 1760–1761, and Hidden Patterns of the Civil War, Digital Scholarship Lab, University of Richmond.

5. See, for example, the Digital Library on American Slavery, Walter Clinton Jackson Library, UNC Greensboro, which includes “NC Runaway Slave Advertisements and the Race & Slavery Petitions Project; Ecclesiastical & Secular Sources for Slave Societies”; The Geography of Slavery in Virginia, University of Virginia; and Lost Friends: Advertisements from the Southwestern Christian Advocate, Historic New Orleans Collection, Louisiana State University Libraries Special Collections.


7. Colored Conventions: Bringing Nineteenth-Century Black Organizing to Digital Life, University of Delaware.


9. On the complicated place of the slave narrative in recent print culture approaches, see Cohen and Stein, eds., Early African American Print Culture (2012), 8; and the recent African American Print Culture spec. issue of MELUS 40.3 (2015), eds. Moody and Rambsy.

10. See, for example, Amanda Gailey’s meditation on the politics of digitizing the racist writings of Joel Chandler Harris in her own Race and Children’s Literature of the Gilded Age project in “A Case for Heavy Editing: The Example of Race and Children’s Literature in the Gilded Age,” The American Literature Scholar in the Digital Age (2011), eds. Amy E. Earhart and Andrew Jewell.


13. On distant reading, those forms of textual analysis made possible by data mining, see Franco Moretti, Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for a Literary History (2005); Moretti, Distant Reading (2013); Matthew Kirschenbaum, “The Remaking of Reading: Data Mining and the Digital Humanities,” National Science Foundation, 12 Oct. 2007. Web. Despite the misconception that distant reading is
the dominant or only reading practice within the digital humanities, Gailey argues that DH still relies heavily on close reading techniques, especially since the labor behind digital archives consists of “old-fashioned, meticulous close reading, so close, in fact, that it often becomes forensic” (128).


15. See Smallwood, Saltwater Slavery, 8, and Roach, Cities of the Dead, on the vortex of enslavement in the Atlantic World.

16. On this point in the contexts of the domestic slave trade in the US, see Johnson, Soul by Soul.


19. On the printing and distribution of Walker’s Appeal, see Peter P. Hinks, To Awaken My Afflicted Brethren: David Walker and the Problem of Antebellum Slave Resistance (1997).

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