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Digital Queer Witnessing

Testimony, Contested Virtual Heritage, and the Apartheid Archive in Soweto, Johannesburg

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By way of introduction, I am going to be a bit “messy” here, confessing that throughout much of the writing of this chapter I have grappled with several themes as I begin a more in-depth period of writing and reflection on three broad areas: the Black Atlantic and diaspora, the Black spatial humanities, and what I am calling digital queer witnessing. Digital queer witnessing encompasses the viewing of reconstructed spaces and places online, using available open-source 3D technologies that allow these sites to act as the virtual containers for testimonies, personal narratives, biographies, and other forms of life writing that have long been silenced or erased through acts of state-supported violence.

I am a strong advocate for engaging my students and colleagues in digital humanities around the messiness of archive making and the importance of documenting our process as “scholars”—making (and I use this word “making” very intentionally) and making certain that we work to better reveal the processes of knowledge construction, tool and platform development, and our interdisciplinary methods. Digital humanities practitioners may have fallen short in disclosing our “under the hood” intellectual processes, but we have arrived at a moment in the field where we can begin to more radically change humanities-based research practices and offer new ways of documenting the intellectual work of digital scholarship and digital humanities.1 I admit that I am also partly to blame for the widespread obsession with the completeness of projects because I have internalized the “publish or perish” model of the American academy, both as a former department chair and digital humanities center codirector. Therefore, I am going to model a bit of this messy thinking and writing in digital humanities in this chapter, with hopes it will begin to make sense as I lay out my process with respect to digital queer witnessing. I provide more questions than answers here, but I hope readers will collectively think through how this methodology might be developed in practical terms.
In light of recent tragedies in places such as Ferguson, Las Vegas, Cuba, Puerto Rico, and so many others, it is very important that we not oversimplify the realities of our everyday lived experiences and those of the communities where we find ourselves doing the work of critical digital humanities. Race, identity, memory, and engaged scholarship are messy and require a renewed commitment to forms of praxis that reveal complexity, contradiction, and frustration regarding the representation of intersectional lives.2

In assembling this volume, editors Roopika Risam and Kelly Baker Josephs asked which “frameworks are most fitting for capturing the specificities of digital humanities and the African diaspora while negotiating between the multilayered terminology describing African-descended peoples (e.g., Black vs. diaspora vs. African American) in the context of digital humanities?”3 My chapter calls for digital humanities scholars to explore even further the humanity of the many actors involved in the liberation struggle throughout the Black Atlantic and how their life histories will help reveal the messiness of massive social movements such as the anti-apartheid movement, where the labels of perpetrator and victim are not always so clear-cut. In an earlier article, “Engagements with Race, Memory, and the Built Environment in South Africa,” I argued that digital humanities lends itself to microhistories or microhistorical reconstruction, the project of virtually re-creating whole miniature worlds, possibly that of the domestic or the residential. Imagine, for example, the forensics of resistance in a smoky bungalow, as it were, or at a small farm in the outskirts of Johannesburg. [Digital humanities] at this scale permits in many cases a reconstruction of “real life” unthinkable in other kinds of historiography.4

Such moves are at the core of digital queer witnessing; collecting, documenting, and assembling the silenced or erased life narratives of the liberation movement, from both victims and perpetrators, suggest that virtual reconstructions can help mediate the inherent tensions exposed through this new historiography of the past. Digital queer witnessing is thus guided by two questions at the nexus between theory and praxis: (1) What ethical responsibilities do digital humanities scholars, who engage in the telling of difficult histories, have to the communities in which they work most directly? (2) How do we use available spatial technologies for bringing together victim and perpetrator perspectives without obscuring the inherent messiness of these histories?

When working across the African Diaspora, “well-intended” projects are never simply that and instead may be framed in racist, sexist, and patriarchal ideologies. As Risam has argued, any discussion of race in a field must begin with acknowledgment of the academy’s complicity in “devaluing Black and Indigenous lives and perpetuating the legacies of colonialism in the cultural and digital records alike.”5 This complicity is visible, she argues, “in structural devaluation facilitated by lack
of representation in the academy; segregation within universities; and the restructuring and defunding of African American, Africana, Black, and Ethnic Studies departments. The overwhelming whiteness of library leadership remains disconcerting as well, since libraries play a central role in constructing the digital cultural record. Therefore, Risam notes, “If digital humanities practitioners are not actively acknowledging the influence of these factors on their work and exploring how to push back against them, they risk enabling them.” In the South African context, the sediments of apartheid remain behind; at institutions of higher learning, African Studies is almost nonexistent. For example, the African Studies Association of Africa was only established in 2013. Although some might argue that we have been in the post-apartheid era for more than two decades now, new forms of apartheid, along with racism, sexism, and segregation, remain omnipresent in South Africa and are difficult to overcome, with well over 38 percent of the population still living in townships—underdeveloped and racially segregated urban areas.

Digital queer witnessing intervenes in the gaps of history produced by ongoing inequalities. In 1989, a queer youth, Stompie Seipei, living in a home rented by Winnie Mandela in Soweto, was murdered, a crime that few are willing to remember, let alone discuss, in any detail. This incident is perhaps one of the most glaring examples where the queer and activist community was suppressed or erased from South African anti-apartheid/liberation histories. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) testimony that highlighted the events occurring at the time of Stompie’s death, along with the deaths of two other young activists at the hands of members of the Mandela United Football Club, is not currently mentioned in the latest 2008/2009 reinterpretation of the Mandela Home by the City of Johannesburg. Digital humanities may actually help sort through such silences and both reconstruct and recover a history that is still very early in its telling and is absent in dominant histories of the liberation struggle. Digital queer witnessing could explain why someone such as Stompie was killed or, at the very least, provide us with a more complex and messy narrative history that allows us to know more of the rationale for suppressing the role of queer activists against apartheid.

The deaths of Stompie and two other presumed queer boys, believed by some to have been orchestrated by Winnie Madikizela-Mandela during the time of Nelson Mandela’s incarceration, remain contested (even erased) in the histories told about the tumultuous 1980s and the widespread struggles against the apartheid regime. In Stompie’s case, suspicion about his sexuality and intimations of alleged abuse by a white Methodist pastor marked his body as illegitimate—incapable of being a true leader in the struggle despite his age, his unique ability, and charisma, which he used to organize school-aged children by the hundreds (some would even say thousands) in protest in the mid- to late 1980s. The erasure of Stompie’s story from the Mandela Home denies both a complex, layered history of the anti-apartheid movement and the lived reality of queer youth, which is suppressed from contemporary liberation histories.
Digital queer witnessing, however, offers the possibility of addressing the messiness of these histories. For example, can currently available methods and technologies be used to build a 3D digital edition platform representing the Mandela Home that is also capable of casting new light on human rights violations that many would prefer remain erased, hidden, or lost? Can Stompie’s story and the untold stories of queer youth in the apartheid movement be represented effectively—and, more importantly, affectively—with these digital methods? What are the tangible political, social, and economic costs—something that an intersectional framework for such a project might help us recover—of capturing the memories of someone such as Stompie in the history of the liberation struggle today? Would such a project lead tourists of the Black Atlantic to become interested in and even compelled to visit sites and discuss this LGBTQIA history? Perhaps more importantly, while preserving erased and important histories, how do digital humanities practitioners and historians address issues of whether visibility, hypervisibility, the archive, and digital representations such as the 3D digital edition may make some people more vulnerable? I ask this last question over and over in my mind.

My work in South Africa speaks to the challenges of representing history and heritage at places characterized by ephemerality, absence, or both. History and heritage may disappear through age and degradation, intentional political suppression, contradictory narratives, and uncertainty and knowledge gaps. In response, my projects create 3D worlds that combine texts, objects, architecture, maps, and consideration of human action to create a layered means of accessing primary- and secondary-source materials. In doing so, my work attempts to recover the history of LGBTQIA activists in the anti-apartheid movement and examines contested events and hidden or difficult histories in ways not currently possible through standard or available online publication platforms.

Several years ago, under the umbrella of my research project The Soweto Historical Geographic Information System (SHGIS), I began to develop a software platform for my research in apartheid-era South Africa: The Social Justice History Platform (SJHP), 3D- and virtual reality-enabled software built atop the Unity game engine platform to document Black spatial humanities in South Africa. The SJHP, now in alpha form, was designed within a kind of digital edition paradigm and is able to display 2D geospatial information (such as maps, photographs, and records), 3D representations of landscapes and locations, and 3D models of historical buildings and objects. Video testimony of human rights violations committed by the apartheid state can be embedded in the platform, but the robust features of a digital publishing platform are required to compare multiple and often contradictory accounts of these events. These contradictory and contested narratives can only be understood when digital queer witnessing is made possible through the availability of new publishing platforms that lay bare the messiness of liberation histories never before made public. Testimony told to TRCs, to the courts for cases beyond the confines of the official TRC process, and more recent
ethnographic interviews with scholars require a more robust set of features for textual analysis.

As designed, *The SJHP* allows users to explore changes to locations or objects over a timeline running along two axes: that of “macrohistory” and a second axis, featuring a secondary series of vertical timelines, called “microhistory,” which provides more specific timelines of contextual details, including the stories of relevant events outside the scope of the 3D view, people involved in the construction or history of the location, etc. . . . Both of these timelines provide the ability for users to advance or reverse through defined points in time, automatically orienting the user’s view to the proper location, and historical transition point, of the historical events they describe.14

This work has raised critical questions about the digital dimensions of queer witnessing. What might be some entry points to queer witnessing of the officializing state-sponsored metanarrative, when the narrative largely absolves principals in the founding mythology (i.e., Winnie Mandela’s complicated narrative) and suppresses and erases exceptions (i.e., LGBTQIA populations and principals) to the patriarchal, heteronormative narrative? How might mapping, text mining, and 3D visualizations help sort through these narratives?

Immersive 3D visualizations, for example, could take the reader into a simulation of the actual space of conflict in the small, dusty, peripheralized, securitized suburb of Soweto—a would-be garden city that is also the site of Black feminist resistance. There in Soweto is a prototypical dwelling, housing an extended family in a space not much larger than a one-bedroom apartment in the Global North. Each visualization of this queer witnessing—in an immersive space peopled with avatars—summons its own particular narrative. The ability to view the microscale of the house and home in Soweto, through the virtual and deployed by this publishing platform, opens up new possibilities for the public to engage with these messy liberation narratives never before made available. Visitors to the publication platform are not only confronted by multiple and contradictory accounts of these human rights violations but are also forced to confront their own beliefs, attitudes, and long-held assumptions about the liberation struggle’s neatly packaged national narrative. As I wrote in an earlier article, The layering of the many narratives also helps lay bare the messiness of archive making, the methodologies of digital ethnography, and the endangered nature of archives across South Africa. I know how very charged the history of Soweto is. . . . There is also value in what we find in the TRC’s memory making process when we are also facing the “disappearance” of those records from the National Archives that requires a much more careful feminist and gender-based praxis of collaboration and really working-in community-based organizations to begin telling these stories.15
Recently, in a pivot that is still very much part of that messy-making process I already discussed, I have been looking at and making-with Dene Grigar and Stuart Moulthrop’s work “Traversals,” in which they document and preserve electronic literature through the Pathfinders project. For Grigar and Moulthrop, video and audio recordings of political demonstrations on historically appropriate platforms, with participation and commentary by the authors of these electronic works of literature, provide useful insights into the process of writing and making. Their project has helped me think through the ways in which I document the process of working in and with community to develop online heritage resources. Grigar and Moulthrop have been using the Scalar platform to document the process of making in ways that allow for multimodal recording with a kind of Clifford Geertz-ian digital approach to thick description. In a first-world context, with robust bandwidth and access to a range of digital equipment, Scalar is proving to be the preferred platform for this kind of work; however, a larger challenge is posed by my own work in South Africa where “community” includes township residents, heritage professionals, and museum curators as part of the greater digital Black Atlantic. In South Africa, low bandwidth, unreliable (or failing) digital infrastructure, and a dearth of financial resources (money) earmarked for public higher education make inclusion a very difficult task, especially in light of the call for #feesmustfall to bring an eventual end to exorbitant school fees. Minimal computing, an approach proposed by the Global Outlook::Digital Humanities (GO::DH) group, has brought attention to ways we might rethink choice versus necessity while focusing attention on an emerging movement in the digital humanities field that “akin to environmentalism, [is] asking for balance between gains and costs in related areas that include social justice issues and de-manufacturing and reuse.” This approach is a sound methodological step forward when taken at the outset of a community-engaged project.

At the start of this chapter I advocated for the messiness of archive making and the importance of documenting our process as “scholars” making the community. We are very consciously making new histories and new narratives across the African diaspora. We are culling documentation and information from previously silenced members of the community, some of which is contested—even by the community’s principals. But we have fallen short in disclosing our “under the hood” intellectual processes. In the case of Black lives across the diaspora and those of others in the Global South, these new practices become an important element of any digital project. Rebuilding trust today, as part of a messy thinking and writing methodology or process, might mean a significant recalibration of our academic workflow, including promotion and tenure guidelines, such that process and making are understood as equally important intellectual endeavors. With respect to historical interpretation at the Mandela House, imagine a multilayered spatial microhistory of queer witnessing displayed or rendered through virtual technologies. Indeed, would it be possible to tell a queer history of that “typical township house” at 8115 Vilakazi? I believe the answer is yes: we have arrived at a moment in the field of digital humanities where
we can now begin to radically change humanities-based research practices and offer new ways of documenting more specifically the intellectual work of digital scholarship and digital humanities. A process of queer witnessing, in which scholars who are committed to reconstructing contested pasts through the use of 3D technologies, can now make legible the sorts of narratives in which victims and perpetrators are no longer easily distinguishable.

Notes

1. "Maker culture" provides an important pathway in considering the methods and pedagogical practices of 3D historical reconstruction scholarship. Sayers has helped theorize and make possible the ways that making is also a form of scholarly and intellectual production. See Sayers, “Why Fabricate?”
2. Ruane, “Re(searching) the Truth about Our Criminal Justice System.” See also Bonnie Thornton Dill, Amy McLaughlin, and Angel David Nieves, “Future Directions of Feminist Research.”
10. Risam, “Beyond the Margins.”
11. Risam, “Beyond the Margins.”
12. Nieves, Apartheid Heritage(s).
17. Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures, 3–32.

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