

Gilroy Goes Digital: A Visionary Volume on Black Tech Practice and Afro-Diasporic Voices in the Digital Humanities

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Abstract:

The digital humanities are too white. This is what past and current scholarship in the field suggests. All the more reason that Roopika Risam's and Kelly Baker Josephs' edited collection *The Digital Black Atlantic* is an innovative and important contribution to the fields of digital humanities, Black studies, and beyond. This visionary volume on Afro-diasporic digital scholarship and Black approaches to digital tools has the potential to reform how the digital humanities are studied, taught, and thought.

Gilroy Goes Digital: Schwarze und afro-diasporische Stimmen in den Digital Humanities

German Abstract:

Laut aktuellem Forschungsstand sind die Digital Humanities noch immer zu weiß. Deshalb stellt der Sammelband *The Digital Black Atlantic*, herausgegeben von Roopika Risam und Kelly Baker Josephs, einen wichtigen, wegweisenden Beitrag in den Digital Humanities dar. Das Sammelwerk zu Schwarzer und afro-diasporischer Digitalität sowie zu Schwarzen Perspektiven in den Digital Humanities dient als Anstoß, um zu überdenken, wie das Feld gelehrt und verstanden wird.

How to cite:

Quast, Fiona: "Gilroy Goes Digital: A Visionary Volume on Black Tech Practice and Afro-Diasporic Voices in the Digital Humanities [Review of: Risam, Roopika and Kelly Baker Josephs (eds.). *The Digital Black Atlantic*. Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2021.]". In: KULT_online 67 (2023).

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22029/ko.2023.1369>



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Risam, Roopika and Kelly Baker Josephs (eds.). *The Digital Black Atlantic*. Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2021. xxiv, 248 pages, 34,68 EUR. ISBN: 978-1-5179-1080-8.

By now, the digital humanities are an established academic discipline. Nevertheless, discussions in the field remain one-sided. Whiteness continues to be centered in discourses on as well as in the digital humanities. Even though in recent years there has been a growing number of scholars who examine the interconnections between Blackness and technology use, scholarship on these issues still lags somewhat behind.

In this regard, *The Digital Black Atlantic* edited by Roopika Risam and Kelly Baker Josephs is a promising contribution to the (digital) humanities. *The Digital Black Atlantic* forms part of the *Debates in the Digital Humanities Series*, a book series from the University of Minnesota Press launched in 2012. It is the first book in the series to discuss Black tech practice, Afro-diasporic voices in the digital humanities as well as digital humanities approaches to the African diaspora. Amongst other things, the collection turns to questions of how Afro-diasporic persons and scholars appropriate digital methods in order to make sense of Black experiences from past to present. The volume does so by bringing together various voices from and on the “intersection of global Black studies and digital studies” (p. xiii).

As a cultural studies scholar, what immediately caught my attention was the volume’s title: *The Digital Black Atlantic*. For scholars in the humanities, especially in anthropology and cultural, postcolonial, and critical race studies, the title must sound quite familiar. As the editors state in the introduction, the collection’s title consciously alludes to Paul Gilroy’s seminal work *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London 1993) that sustainably contributed to new perspectives in cultural studies. In this work, Gilroy critically approaches concepts such as ethnicity, nationality, and race as well as Eurocentric understandings of

modernity and introduces the framework of the Black Atlantic. In doing so, the academic coined a new theoretical paradigm in postcolonial cultural theory.

So, what exactly does *The Digital Black Atlantic* try to do? Do Risam and Baker Josephs strive to adapt Gilroy's thought to today's digital world? Early in the volume my questions are being answered. The editors' note reveals that Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* serves as the volume's "theoretical core and articulating principle" (p. x). Even though the editors strongly rely on Gilroy's book as framework and common ground for discussion, they explain that their work aims to go beyond that. And it does: With contributions from the USA and Canada, but also from South Africa, Nigeria, and Dominica, the volume deals with texts from a far wider geographic speak than Gilroy's *Black Atlantic* originally did.

On this basis, the editors define the Digital Black Atlantic as "the body of interdisciplinary scholarship that examines connections between African diasporic communities and technology" (p. ix). The cultural forms under examination in the collection range from digital archives, social media, open access libraries, educational tools, and digital music production to virtual reality and video games. The Digital Black Atlantic is discussed in 19 chapters which could each work as a stand-alone paper. The chapters are however thematically grouped into the following four parts: I Memory, II Crossings, III Relations and IV Becomings. "Memory" explores challenges and new digital possibilities for historical recovery. The first chapter of part I, "The Sankofa Principle: From the Drum to the Digital," opens with Abdul Alkalimat's intriguing presentation of the self-developed D7-research method (cf. p. 9), a research method on digital or digitized data that pays particular attention to contributing to the research community and the larger world. "Crossings" turns to digital ways of knowledge transmission and production in the African diaspora, for example, in the forms of topic modelling (cf. p. 86) and digital mapping of the racial division of space in Canada (cf. p. 88), as outlined by Austin Clark. In "Relations," readers are introduced to different methods to digital resistance. The last part on "Becomings" mentions various perspectives on how the digital humanities as scholarly field has been taught and suggests new, interdisciplinary approaches to studying and working the field. *The Digital Black Atlantic* closes with a beautifully written essay-style chapter by Kaiama Glover and Alex Gil in which both scholars make a call for new ways of collaborative work between humanists and scholars from digital studies that includes the mention of interdisciplinary

teams, exchange on skillsets as well as clear boundaries regarding time and room to work on shared but also individual academic projects (cf. p. 230–233).

The various texts presented in *The Digital Black Atlantic* are of different styles and genres and include research articles, case studies, short reports and essays. Though this is exactly what the editors had intended — as becomes clear in the 2017 CfP to the volume — as an interested reader, some of the rather short chapters left me unsatisfied. Here, the reader does not seem to get the chance to give some of the issues raised further thought. Of course, this can be seen as great opportunity for self-study and one might argue that the editors' goal to spark several conversations on the Digital Black Atlantic and foster debates in digital humanities (cf. p. x) is thus met.

Furthermore, Risam and Baker Josephs' aim is to “shed light on [...] digital inquiry in African diasporic cultures [...] to offer one entry point, an initial set of terms, for digital black scholarship, discourse and citation” (p. x). The volume indeed serves as important basis to creating a source of reference and citation. The editors do a fantastic job with providing readers with a broad range of important titles and names.

I suggest that the volume has the potential to make a difference in digital humanities in particular and in further disciplines in general. Moreover, the volume can serve as inspiration to digital humanities practitioners, but also to other scholars. It provides readers with new ideas on what digital methods can be used and in what ways to incorporate them into various study designs as some of the chapters give practical advice, e.g. on how to collect and save data (cf. p. 27). The volume can also function as introduction to digital tools, methods and Afro-diasporic digital projects such as the “Black Atlantic Map” (<https://jamilapewu.com/the-black-atlantic-map-my-first-attempt/>) which visualizes networks and movements between Black Atlantic sites or the “Goin' North Project” (<https://goinnorth.org/about>) on the Great Migration by African Americans to Philadelphia in 1970s.

What I found especially enjoyable when reading the volume was its clear and concise language throughout all of the chapters. The editors do an impressive work in making sure the volume is reader-friendly and understood by scholars and people outside of academia alike. This I find especially important when it comes to scholarship on communities that are not well represented in academia. In this regard, the volume could easily be used as introductory

material to the field of digital humanities for scholars as well as non-scholars foreign to the topics discussed in the volume.

Finally, I come back to how the authors intended to go beyond Gilroy's framework. The authors indeed do so by introducing a variety of perspectives from various fields and locations and on varying materials. However, I wished for an even more diverse collection of different Afro-diasporic voices. Risam and Baker Josephs wish to avoid reproducing Gilroy's positioning of the Black Atlantic as an Anglo-American phenomenon (cf. p. x), yet the volume only focuses on a selected number of Anglophone Afro-diasporic sites and scholarship. This means the volume is still a few steps away from being inclusive — and I am sure the editors would agree with me. In the volume there is, for example, no inclusion of Latin American Afro-diasporas such as Brazilian Afro-diasporas or Spanish-speaking Afrodescendants. Scholarship on Latin America is currently, simultaneously growing, though. In the same year that *The Digital Black Atlantic* was published, Andrés Villar and Eduard Arriaga's *Afro-Latinx Digital Connections* (Gainesville 2021) was released. *Afro-Latinx Digital Connections* comprises both research articles and interviews on Black and Afro-Latinx cultural practices that revolve around the digital — and thus results in a comparable collection — and can serve as complementary to *The Digital Black Atlantic*, or vice versa. In future volumes, it would be impressive to see further international and plurilingual connections between such scholarship and (research) communities.