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Introduction

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Introduction

Jean-Pierre Le Glaunec

- ¹ Text Encoding Initiative, metadata, relational database, linked open data, data mining, Dublin Core Schemas, GIS, XML, CSS, Javascript, back end, front end... The vocabulary characteristic of what are known as the digital humanities is not always easy to understand, or to use. Yet the field is a fashionable one, as can be seen, for instance, from the call for projects by funding agencies in the humanities and social sciences, or the creation of specialized research centres on both sides of the Atlantic. In Canada, the l'Université de Montréal hosts the Centre de recherche interuniversitaire sur les humanités numériques; the University of Victoria on the Pacific coast hosts a laboratory named 'Electronic Textual Cultures Lab'. The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada very recently announced a programme of grants focused on 'Skills and Work in the Digital Economy.' In the spring of 2019, the French National Research Agency launched a Flash Call, 'Open science: research practices and open research data,' with a budget of more than two million euros. The keywords of the twenty-five selected projects are 'interoperability,' 'open data,' 'data management,' 'e-infrastructure,' and even '*impulser la science ouverte*' ('boosting open science')—plenty of food for thought for the uninitiated. Digital technology could apparently give a much-needed boost to the meaning and legitimacy of the the humanities and social sciences, guaranteeing a heightened form of awareness and transferability of knowledge to non-specialized audiences, while also making it possible to create pathways between the separate territories of historians, anthropologists and other sociologists and the 'real' world. It would seem too that the digital humanities could go hand in hand with innovative teaching practices, as one might deduce from the increase since the early 2000s in the number of Master's and other postgraduate degrees with a digital profile. Master's in 'Digital Humanities' at the University of Paris, Sciences & Lettres. Specialized training in the same subject at the Université Polytechnique Hauts-de-France, formerly the University of Valenciennes. Lyon 2, Paris 8, Montpellier 3, McGill University in Montreal, several programmes in the Netherlands and the United States:² the trend is clear, the time has come for the humanities—but not in the traditional sense.

- 2 The field may be fashionable, but it is far from commanding universal agreement.³ The digital humanities are, for example, accused of reproducing mainstream models, and furthermore of being a means of entry to the university world for neo-liberal operators. The humanities which rely upon the most up-to-date technology are said to depend upon data which reflect systemic bias, and are therefore likely to perpetuate asymmetrical power-structures affecting gender, race or social class.⁴ It is said that this field plays to the advantage of prestigious universities in countries with a colonial tradition, and of the highest-profile scholars, since, rather than working in favour of the decolonization of knowledge, it enables them to monopolize the scarce resources allocated to the humanities and social sciences.⁵ The term ‘digital humanities’ appears sometimes to be used very loosely: some people invoke it as soon as they use an open source computer programme or develop a smartphone application or a website. A further criticism relates to the work done behind the scenes by menial research assistants—underpaid students who key information into a database, coders and graphic designers who keep it up and running, etc.—who are often invisible behind the persons responsible for projects that gain huge media coverage, or enable one university institution to distinguish itself from another, and thus encourage the hyper-competitiveness that is characteristic of our present system for the production of knowledge.
- 3 Not only do they not command universal agreement, but the digital humanities raise practical or epistemological questions which are sometimes difficult to unravel. How, for instance, can one assess the ‘results’ of a digital humanities researcher in an application for a grant or promotion?⁶ How can one reconcile the expectations of research institutions with those of peer-review panels that use traditional criteria to assess the production of their colleagues? How can one measure the percentage of real responsibility of the director of a given research project, whose name is essential for the gaining of major funding, but whose true specialism is closer to the traditional humanities? Should doctoral students in history, sociology, anthropology and other humanities and social science disciplines all be capable of writing a computer programme once they have gained their degree, or is it still possible to stand up against the digital groundswell? How can one guarantee the long-term survival of projects once the technology used for them has become obsolete, or research funding has dried up (Smithies *et al.* 2019)? How should projects which have become dormant be archived? How can one use open-source federative software tools to reduce production costs and share resources from one project to another?⁷ How can one measure the impact of a digital product on the basis of simple web traffic statistics? How can one use comparable projects to evaluate the cost/benefit ratio obtained? And more broadly, how and why should digital humanists be accountable to funding agencies and to companies which finance them?
- 4 Despite the criticisms and the pitfalls, the history of slave trading and slavery in the Atlantic and Indian Ocean—the very regions which are the subject of this dossier, unprecedented in the annals of Francophone historiography—has not escaped the *turn*—for there is indeed a turning point—of the digital humanities. The CD-ROM projects of the late 1990s and early 2000s have given way to huge interdisciplinary and international initiatives bringing together tens and sometimes hundreds of actors, academics, technicians, programmers and research centres. The pioneers, as several of the authors of this dossier remind us, were the creators of the highly influential

database on the Transatlantic slave trade, *The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database* published on CD-ROM (Eltis *et al.* 1999), and known today by the name of *Slave Voyages*. This resource made it possible to refine our knowledge, in both quantitative and qualitative terms, of a traumatic episode that is fundamental to the history of the Americas. The database constructed between 1980 and 1990 by Gwendolyn Midlo Hall on slavery and the slave trade in Louisiana (1719-1820), initially on CD-ROM and subsequently on line,⁸ also played a pioneering role, as did the platform of iconographic sources initiated by the anthropologist Jerome S. Handler, a specialist in slavery in Barbados—which cost very little to develop but has had a deep and lasting influence over the past two decades.⁹

- 5 Digital projects relating directly or indirectly to slavery have multiplied in recent years, driven by researchers, university centres (in particular ‘Matrix—The Center for Digital Humanities and Social Sciences’ at Michigan State University), but also by government organisations, libraries and actors in the world of archives or pressure groups. There are plenty of examples: the hugely informative Digital Library of the Caribbean based at the University of Florida,¹⁰ or the Banque numérique des patrimoines martiniquais or ‘Manioc,’ a collaborative project led by the Université des Antilles and the Université de la Guyane.¹¹ In a different geographical context, significant databases (for example on anti-slavery, or the laws governing slaves and the slave trade) have been created within the framework of Eurescl, a major European project directed by the co-editor-in-chief of the present journal, Myriam Cottias. In France, the Comité national pour la mémoire et l’histoire de l’esclavage, and its successor the *Fondation pour la mémoire de l’esclavage*, have launched several digital initiatives, in particular relating to the memorial sites of slavery.¹² In the United Kingdom the outcome of the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade in 2007-2008 was to set in motion a wide-ranging reflection on how to raise awareness of the inheritance of a slave-trading past in the social and political structures of the countries formerly under the colonial rule of the British Empire.
- 6 One result of this reflection has been the very recent uploading of the ‘Legacies of British Slave-Ownership’ database, which makes it possible to identify slave-owners over the long period of British involvement in slavery, not only in the Caribbean but also in the Cape of Good Hope and Mauritius in the Indian Ocean.¹³
- 7 In the USA there has been a huge surge in the digitising of sources since the beginning of this century. Among the first collections to be put on line were the testimonies of former slaves gathered in the framework of the famous *Federal Writers Project* in the 1930s and now accessible on the Library of Congress website. All archival centres and university libraries of any standing have fallen into step. The Heartman Collection of documents on the history of slavery in Louisiana held at the Xavier University of Louisiana in New Orleans, which was for long only available on microfilm and accessible only to the major English-speaking universities, was digitized in its entirety at the beginning of the 2010s. And again in New Orleans, after years of refusal and then hesitation, the archdiocesan authorities finally opted to digitize a portion of their archives, making it possible to reconstruct the history of the religious practices of the Afro-Catholics, free and enslaved, in the region. Equally in the South of the United States, the historian Jane Landers at Vanderbilt University has supervised the scanning and digitization of tens of thousands of archival documents at risk of destruction, originating in the slave states of Latin American and the Caribbean (in particular Brazil,

Colombia and Cuba)—and has trained dozens of students in the use of digital tools. North of the American border, and with funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada in particular, Paul Lovejoy has supervised large-scale projects on the lives of men and women of African descent ('Studies in the History of the African Diaspora Documents').

- 8 In spite of repeated criticism over the past twenty years of the concept of 'slave agency,' which some consider to be clichéd or badly defined,¹⁴ the slaves' agency, or capacity for action, and the search for the voices expressing their resistance, are generally central to projects which claim to belong to the digital humanities—whatever their country of origin. Technologies should make it possible to come closer to the lived experience of enslaved people and to highlight their humanity and their ceaseless quest for dignity. This approach ties in with another, the biographical, which has been very influential in recent years in studies of the Black Atlantic (Lindsay & Sweet 2013). The life-stories and voices of slaves are, for example, central to a platform hosted by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill ('North American Slave Narratives'), which brings together several dozen slave narratives, digitized and re-transcribed in their entirety. At the University of Glasgow, a database of runaway slaves announced in the British press ('Runaway Slaves in Britain: bondage, freedom and race in the eighteenth century') has shed light on the lives of men and women who for so long were hidden away and forgotten in the columns of 18th-century newspapers. This database has had a significant impact beyond the university world, as is clear from the production of a short film, *1745. An Untold Story of Slavery* on the fate of two women slaves on the run in Scotland. Another database, this time American, 'Rediscovering The Stories Of Self-Liberating People,' has as its mission to collect, via crowdsourcing, all the runaway advertisements published in the United States. Yet another initiative, 'Enslaved. Peoples of the Historical Slave Trade' aims to link several substantial data collections in order to maximize the chances of reconstructing the history of slaves forced to grow sugar cane, tobacco, cotton, indigo etc., or employed as servants or artisans in the slave societies of the Americas.
- 9 In all these projects and countries, the leading lights of contemporary historiography have joined in the digital game and explored non-traditional means of publication with a view to countering the imperialist bias of the archives, making hitherto silent voices heard, and if possible reforming the genre of the printed scientific article, which is particularly time-consuming to produce and reaches a very restricted readership. Such is the case for example of Ada Ferrer ('Digital Aponte'), of Simon Newman ('Hidden In Plain Sight: Escaped Slaves In Late Eighteenth- And Early Nineteenth-Century Jamaica'), of Vincent Browne ('Slave Revolt in Jamaica, 1760–1761'), of Bryan Wagner ('Louisiana Slave Conspiracies'), and, from a more militant point of view, of Jessica Marie Johnson,¹⁵ a pioneering figure in the radical Black humanities—as can be seen from the 'Electric marronnage' project, one of the research and research dissemination platforms to which she contributes.¹⁶
- 10 The six articles in this dossier, on the history of slave trading in the Atlantic Ocean (Henry Lovejoy and Andrew Sluyter), and in the Indian Ocean and the surrounding Asian maritime areas (Ulbe Bosma *et al.*; Rafaël Thiébaud), on escaping as a form of resistance (Léon Robichaud), and on the ethical problems arising from the archives of the post-slavery period (Katrina Keefer *et al.*), all belong to this digital wave that is sweeping over the history of slaveries in modern times. The authors propose, at a

heuristic level, a set of what seem to us promising pathways towards a means of understanding appropriate for a ‘digital creasing of the world’.¹⁷ This ‘creasing’ is, we believe, likely to bring those researching the *world* of slaves and their audiences closer together by applying non-conventional analytical criteria to new sources, or to sources which have been re-assessed with the help of new tools.

- 11 The act of ‘creasing’—that is to say using the digital humanities to raise the surface of what was traditionally smoothed over by the sources—is based on a ‘style of enquiry’¹⁸ common to all six authors of this dossier concerned with the ‘best practices’ in their disciplines. If the traditional humanities and social sciences are based on methodological approaches that are constantly in flux but nonetheless relatively stable over time, the encounter between the digital humanities and our field of research must involve an element of introspection, aimed at separating out the right approaches, and the right tools, from mistaken manoeuvres and paths best left unexplored.
- 12 How for instance can one recognize the contribution of the various actors involved in a high-profile project such as ‘Liberated Africans’ directed by Henry Lovejoy? How and why might one map death—the tragic end of thousands of men and women who left Africa but whose bodies never reached the other side of the ocean—in the history of the Transatlantic slave trade (Sluyter)? How can one take account in a database of the multidirectional movement of the traffic in slaves and captives in the Indian Ocean and the Asian maritime area (Bosma *et al.* and Thiébaud)? How can one, and why should one, assess the successes and failures of a digital platform on marronnage which has never benefited from major research funding (Robichaud)? What is the correct ethical approach to post-slavery sources and their enhancement by means of digital tools?
- 13 These are some of the questions raised in this research dossier, which has been led by Jane Landers, Henry Lovejoy, Paul Lovejoy et Jean-Pierre Le Glaunec.

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NOTES

1. All the links in this introduction were valid in November 2020.
2. See Chris Alen Sula *et al.* 2017. See also Mégane de Amorim, 'À quoi mènent les masters en "humanités numériques"', *Le Monde*, 30 January 2019: https://www.lemonde.fr/campus/article/2019/01/30/a-quoi-menent-les-masters-en-humanites-numeriques_5416520_4401467.html.
3. See the discussions in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*: 'The Digital Humanities Debacle,' Nan Z. Da, 27 March 2019 (https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-digital-humanities-debacle/?bc_nonce=upysqrpd7l0pi7j6qoz7rg&cid=reg_wall_signup). See also Daniel Allington, Sarah Brouillette & David Golumbia, 'Neoliberal Tools (and Archives): A Political History of Digital Humanities', *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 1 May 2016: <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/neoliberal-tools-archives-political-history-digital-humanities>, and Clavert & Schafer 2019.
4. On this question, see the paper delivered by Miriam Posner at the *Keystone Digital Humanities* conference at the University of Pennsylvania in 2015: 'The radical potential of the Digital Humanities: The most challenging computing problem is the interrogation of power' (<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2015/08/12/the-radical-unrealized-potential-of-digital-humanities/>).
5. On all these questions, and in general on the various debates surrounding the digital humanities, see Gold & Klein 2019.
6. This question was recently the subject of a round-table discussion at the Modern Language Association Convention: 'MLA 2020 Session: Roundtable on "Digital Scholarship in Tenure and Promotion,' 31 July 2019: <https://infotech.mla.hcommons.org/2019/mla-2020-session-roundtable-on-digital-scholarship-in-tenure-and-promotion/>.
7. See in particular the Jupyter project and hub, <https://jupyter.org/index.html>.
8. Hall 1999. The data were first uploaded to the website 'Afro-Louisiana History and Genealogy, 1718-1820' (<https://www.ibiblio.org/laslave/introduction.php>) and then integrated into the 'Enslaved' project (<https://enslaved.org>).
9. <http://www.slaveryimages.org/s/slaveryimages/page/welcome>. This site is now under the direction of Henry Lovejoy, one of the co-authors of the present dossier.
10. See the collection entitled 'Esclavage et résistance':

<https://dloc.com/results/?t=slavery,resistance,,&f=ZZ,=ZZ,+AU,+TO&t=slavery,resistance,,&f=ZZ,=ZZ,+AU,+TO>.

11. See also the database of family names in Guadeloupe and Martinique ('Les noms de familles guadeloupéennes et martiniquaises') created and published on line by the 'Marche du 23 mai 1998' Committee in collaboration with the Guadeloupe Region—a sure sign that the digital humanities allow actors in civil society to take advantage of sources to which previously only professionals or academics had access.

12. See also the website 'Traite négrière, esclavage et abolitions, pour un inventaire muséographique': <http://www.cnmhe.fr/inventaire/presentation.html>. The site 'Mémoire et histoire de l'esclavage,' www.esclavage-memoire.com, built by the CNMHE, unfortunately no longer exists (the URL points to a WordPress blog managed by an unknown person), but screenshots from it can be found using the *Wayback Machine* tool on the Internet Archive site: http://web.archive.org/web/*/http://esclavage-memoire.com/.

13. A similar database, created with funding from the French National Research Agency (ANR) programme 'REPAIRS : Réparations, compensations et indemnités au titre de l'esclavage, Europe-Amériques-Afrique (XIX^e-XXI^e siècles),' dealing with the claims for compensation in 1825 by French slave-owners in Sainte-Domingue, and the distribution of indemnities in 1849 to slave-owners in the French Empire (West Indies-Guyane-Senegal-Reunion-Nosi-Bé-Sainte-Marie) is currently under construction.

14. See for example the work of Walter Johnson, Trevor Burnard, and more recently Randy Browne. Further details will be found in the introduction to *Le Glaunec* 2021.

15. See the very fine interview she gave to the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 23 July 2016: <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/digital-humanities-interview-jessica-marie-johnson/>.

16. On marronnage, see also the 'Mapping marronage' project directed by Annette Josette-Gabriel.

17. I owe this expression ('un plissement numérique du monde') to Jean-Max Noyer: https://archivesic.ccsd.cnrs.fr/sic_00701931v3.

18. I owe this expression ('un style d'enquête') to Silvia Marzagalli (Marzagalli 2001).

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