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Slavery, Monuments, and the Black Digital Humanities

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In recent years, my scholarly life has taken a decided turn away from traditional art history. About two years ago, I began to call myself a public art historian. Now, I identify myself as a public scholar who works at the intersection of art and history. This shift has to do with my own frustrations with art history as a discipline, and with my desire to broaden the scope of the conversation around sculpture and monuments toward a focus on dialogic processes and community engagement. A good friend and colleague points out that I am “mad” at art history; she is right. First, in the twenty-first century, I often ask myself about the relevance of a discipline that has worked hard at exclusion.¹ Second, I want my scholarship to be accessible to diverse audiences; the paywall behind which much of humanities scholarship resides prohibits such access. Third, I conceived of my current digital project, *Contemporary Monuments to the Slave Past*, as a work of public history. I decided early on to deliver it through two open-source web publishing platforms, Omeka and Scalar, making all of the content and my images available as open-access educational resources.

The Center for Community and Civic Engagement at Carleton College has created a useful [Venn diagram](#) of the constituent elements of public scholarship. Civic responsibility, reciprocity, public knowledge, and creativity all overlap and intersect with public scholarship. This expansive idea of public scholarship allows for a range of scholarly activities, including public lectures, exhibitions, opinion pieces, and reports for community partners. Similar to the definition by Scott Peters that Laura Holzman provides in the introduction, the center offers a definition of public scholarship as “scholarly or creative activity that joins serious intellectual endeavor with commitment to public practice and public consequences.” Both definitions contain the ideas of public value and public good with the assertion that public scholarship can enrich public knowledge about difficult aspects of American history.

As a public scholar, I am dedicated to enriching public knowledge and contributing to the nascent public discussions on slavery and monuments. With the Confederate monument controversy continuing to dominate the news cycle, we need to have a different conversation about the monumental landscape. I have been encouraged by the way in which communities have engaged the slave past on the local level. Communities are debating, wrestling with, and acknowledging the difficult and traumatic legacy of slavery. They are then commissioning permanent memorials and public spaces dedicated to the remembrance of slavery. *Contemporary Monuments to the Slave Past* is concerned foremost with how communities think about and engage with history, monuments, and public space. My project takes as its subject monuments that memorialize the slave past from the transatlantic slave trade to emancipation and freedom. Frequently, I am told that the

monuments I work on are not “art” or they are “bad art.” This is a moot point for me. The monuments I study are about how local stakeholders and artists negotiate and navigate aesthetic decisions about the memorialization and representation of slavery.

My work is also a deliberate scholarly engagement with slavery and monuments within the digital realm in all of its messiness, ugliness, and controversy. I am effectively building an archive of monuments to the slave past accompanied by interpretative essays. Kim Gallon argues for a “technology of recovery” in her cogent writings about black digital humanities. She proposes that this technology of recovery is “characterized by efforts to bring forth the full humanity of marginalized peoples through the use of digital platforms and tools.”² Gallon argues that such recovery “is a deeply political enterprise” that “troubles the very core of what we have come to know as the humanities by recovering alternate constructions of humanity that have been excluded” from the digital humanities.³ In her work on black digital practice and slavery, Jessica Marie Johnson underscores Gallon’s point, contending that “black digital practice uses the commodification of blackness during the slave trade as a reference point, building sites, projects, organizations, and tools that resist and counteract slavery’s dehumanizing impulse.”⁴ This commitment to the recovery and humanity of the black subject, and my intervention into “white” digital humanities are at the core of *Contemporary Monuments to the Slave Past*.

As part of this recovery, I chose open-source platforms in order to allow public access to the project. I have adapted my writing style to address high school and college students, particularly as *Contemporary Monuments to the Slave Past* is realized on Omeka. This means a use of plain English and straightforward presentation of complex historical and art-historical ideas and issues. With Grace Yasumura (my research assistant/project manager), we are developing a community-sourced aspect of the project that will gather monument data from the public through local historical societies. This turn to crowd-sourcing through technology reflects my own commitment to engaging the public in building an archive and monument database.

In my shift from art historian to public scholar, I have learned something essential: I can create an intellectually and methodologically rich project and ask for public commitment in coproducing knowledge.

Notes

¹ For example, see recent news coverage on the lack of racial and gender equity in museum collections: Julia Halperin and Charlotte Burns, “Museums Claim They Are Paying More Attention to Female Artists. That’s an Illusion,” *Artnet*, September 19, 2019, <https://news.artnet.com/womens-place-in-the-art-world/womens-place-art-world-museums-1654714>; Julia Jacobs, “Female Artists Made Little Progress in Museums Since 2008, Survey Finds,” *New York Times*, September 19, 2019; Chad M. Topaz, “Diversity of Artists in Major U.S. Museums,” *PLOS/ONE* 14, no. 3 (March 20, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0212852>; and Meilan Solly, “Survey Finds that White Men Dominate Collections of Major Art Museums,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, (March 21, 2019), <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/survey-finds-majority-artists-represented-major-museums-are-white-men-180971771>.

² Kim Gallon, “Making a Case for the Black Digital Humanities,” in *Debates in Digital Humanities 2016*, eds. Matthew K. Gold and Lauren F. Klein (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2016), <https://dhdebates.gc.cuny.edu/read/untitled/section/fa10e2e1-oc3d-4519-a958-d823aac989eb#cho4>.

³ Gallon, "Making the Case for Black Digital Humanities." See also Safiya Umoja Noble, "Toward a Critical Black Digital Humanities," in *Debates in Digital Humanities 2019*, eds. Matthew K. Gold and Lauren F. Klein (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2019), <https://dhdebates.gc.cuny.edu/read/untitled-f2acf72c-a469-49d8-be35-67f9ac1e3a60/section/5aafe7fe-db7e-4ec1-935f-09d8028a2687#cho2>; Rochelle Terman, "Black Studies and Digital Humanities: Perils and Promise," October 3, 2012, Doreen B. Townsend Center for the Humanities, University of California, Berkeley, <https://townsendcenter.berkeley.edu/blog/black-studies-and-digital-humanities-perils-and-promise>; and Moya Z. Bailey, "All the Digital Humanists are White, All the Nerds are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave," *Journal of Digital Humanities* 1, no. 1 (Winter 2011), <http://journalofdigitalhumanities.org/1-1/all-the-digital-humanists-are-white-all-the-nerds-are-men-but-some-of-us-are-brave-by-moya-z-bailey>.

⁴ Jessica Marie Johnson, "Markup Bodies: Black [Life] Studies and Slavery [Death] Studies at the Digital Crossroads," *Social Text* 137 36, no. 1 (December 2018): 66.