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On the Interpretation of Digital Caribbean Dreams

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Kaiama's Dream

Once upon a time there was a humanist. For hours upon hours, days upon days (and sometimes nights upon nights), she toiled away alone in her office, tucked behind the ivy-covered walls of her ivory tower. She was happy with her professional life—typing away at her monograph, revising a peer-reviewed journal article or two, doing research for her syllabi . . .

But our humanist suspected that there were other things she could do with her computer. She believed there could be more to her desktop than word processing and Google doc-ing. She even thought—hoped—that maybe it could be made to do magic. For, you see, our humanist had a very specific magic trick in mind, one that would involve algorithms, "scripts," and other such exotic stuff—and she suspected that that brilliant machine of hers might help her pull it off.

But how? The world of possibility behind her screen was an endless void as far as she could tell. She would need some intrepid soul to guide her through the looking glass. But who? Our humanist, a scholar of francophone Caribbean literature it should be noted, had only ever worked with others of her kind: the Hispanists and Anglophonists, Afro-Americanists and postcolonialists of her writing partnerships and working groups. Who among that tribe would be any more capable than she of getting to the other side of the black mirror and making her dream of magic come true?

After many months spent wondering fruitlessly about the infinite mystery of pixels resolving and dissolving on her monitor, our humanist remembered something marvelous. She remembered the unicorn in the library: her university's new Digital Scholarship Coordinator for History and the Humanities—a librarian and technologist who also just happened to be a PhD-wielding Caribbeanist. A unicorn. And she thought maybe, just maybe, that extraordinary

creature might be willing to share some of his magic with her.

So out of her office and across the way she went. To the library. Home of books and, as it happens, many other dazzling technologies. Mere moments later, she emerged from this fabulous encounter—starry-eyed, enlightened, and ready to begin dreaming in earnest.

Well, it went something like that, anyway.

I, Kaiama Glover, am, of course, that humanist—and Alex Gil was and is the "unicorn" in this story. Together we have spent the last several years conducting a series of fantastic experiments with the Caribbean digital. Our first joint production, a centenary commemoration of the poet-statesman Aimé Césaire in 2013, proposed a brand-new take on the academic conference.[i] From there, in 2014, we began collaborating on an inter-institutional digital Black Atlantic workshop, which we ran for three years.[ii] That same year we won a National Endowment for the Humanities Digital Start-Up Grant, which ultimately enabled us to launch the born-digital, peer-reviewed Caribbean Studies journal/platform *archipelagos journal* [formerly *sx archipelagos*] in 2016.[iii] Also since 2014, we have been co-organizers of "The Caribbean Digital," an annual international colloquium focused on the intersections of scholarship and the digital in the Caribbean and its diasporas.[iv] Our aim in every instance of this collaboration has been to place the Americas at the vanguard and center of digital humanities scholarship. Focused at once on nurturing a robust intellectual community, showcasing work in the field of Caribbean studies, and developing models for ethical team-building and technological innovation, we have worked consistently to tap into and make space for an ever-widening circle of digi-curious and digi-capable Caribbeanist colleagues. And in doing all of this we have been rigorously attentive to the ethos of our collaborative praxis within the vast mythos undergirding the too-often fairytale world of the digital humanities.

Our ever-evolving partnership has led most recently to the development of *In the Same Boats: Toward an Intellectual Cartography of the Afro-Atlantic*—my humanist's dream made real. *Same Boats* presents a series of interactive, content-rich maps that trace the movement of intellectuals from the Caribbean and wider Americas throughout the Atlantic world.[v] Its aim is to chart the extent to which Afro-Caribbean, Afro-American, and Afro-Latinx cultural actors have been in both timely and sustained conversation with one another: attending the same conferences

and festivals, active in the same political groups, elbow to elbow in the same Parisian cafés and on the same planes, and—perhaps literally and certainly metaphorically—in the same boats.

The platform was born of my personal frustration as a so-called Francophonist with the limits and constraints of my positioning, both in my graduate training and then as a professor and scholar, within the linguo-cultural bounds of a university French department. I was trained to operate, and had become accustomed to operating, on the margins of what remains a decidedly Eurocentric structuring of the academy. I spent much of my time and—crucially, as a junior faculty member—much of my "professional development" efforts working to "make it" in French; publishing, conferencing, and collaborating more often in spaces defined by the French language than in those that would have allowed for more expansive Global South-sited connections. This is not an uncommon phenomenon. Scholars of the Americas often find themselves in the position of negotiating nation-language frontiers that are the stubborn legacies of colonialism. The partitioning of the postcolonial into Anglophone, Francophone, Hispanophone, and Lusophone spaces persists, despite being in so many ways at odds with the shared sociocultural and historical realities of the Atlantic world.

Thus, when I approached Alex, it was to talk to him about my dream of pushing back against the walls of these academic siloes. "Would it not be extraordinary," I asked him, "if there were some place online where I could see if and how, say, Haitian writer-intellectual-militant-communist-activist René Depestre's travels—from Haiti to Western Europe to Eastern Europe to and through South America back to Western Europe; again to Haiti; then to Cuba, China, Vietnam, and Russia; and, finally, back to Western Europe—lined up with the trajectories of Kamau Brathwaite or Katherine Dunham, of Langston Hughes or Sylvia Wynter, of Lydia Cabrera or Aimé Césaire? And would we (read: you) be able to build that?"

My desire for that "place online" was, in a nutshell, the genesis of *In the Same Boats*—a platform that, as I dreamed it, would render visually impactful and easily accessible the dimensions of a multilingual, profoundly rhizomatic Afro-Atlantic world. *In the Same Boats* was to be a literal, relational tracing of hemispheric Black intellectual history, ultimately revealing proximities among our writers, historians, and visual and performing artists that otherwise might be missed. I dreamed of an infinite series of multiple individual maps produced on a common template by specialists of the different linguistic regions of the western Atlantic world—a sort of

pretextual and paratextual visual corroboration of the work of scholars like Raphael Dalleo, Michael Dash, Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel, Brent Edwards, Michel Fabre, Guillermina di Ferrari, Silvio Torres-Saillant, and others who have committed to thinking the twentieth-century Afro-Atlantic as an integrally networked chronotope. It would be an ongoing, collaborative venture—an invitation of sorts that would provide scholars with the opportunity both to participate in the development of a unique platform and to imagine research projects and pedagogical initiatives that transgress the geopolitical borders separating the various nations of the Americas. According to my plan (dream), each map would be taken on by an individual scholar and would trace the physical movement of a single figure. And the nodal points on each map would function as so many portals leading to archival and critical content. The layering of these individual maps would make plain any points of spatiotemporal intersection, thereby generating an increasingly comprehensive physical and conceptual cartography—a dramatic, open-access platform from which to explore the interlaced trajectories that led to the overlapping emergence of key Black Atlantic cultural and political constructs.

This is the dream I spelled out in an email to Alex in 2016. And now—thrillingly—*In the Same Boats* is well on its way to becoming a real thing in the world. But the journey from there to here—through the back end of my computer screen to the beautiful visualization our platform has become—was hard won. The project I first proposed to Alex—an ever-updating, endlessly expanding resource for the entirety of the Afro-Atlanticist scholarly community—was, in fact, an impossible dream. It reflected my naïveté about the affordances of the digital, as well as its limitations. Although Alex was on board from word one—as enthusiastic and dream-fueled as I was—he was also surprisingly skeptical (for a unicorn!). His reluctance gave me pause, which, of course, was his intention. He needed me to recognize that, although it was all well and good—all well and great even—for me to spin my tale of overlapping, interactive mapping marvels, it would take more than pretty prose to make it real. So those initial conversations with my librarian-scholar-technologist collaborator involved grounding and reorientation. They involved me arriving at a better understanding of just what such a platform would entail in terms of capital and human resources, maintenance, and being tethered to the project into the foreseeable future. Most importantly, it involved Alex getting me to see that there is no magic in my PC, that anything we were able to make would involve knowledge, transparency, ethics, error, and labor.

That said, dreaming was by no means off the table.

Alex's Interpretation

I met Kaiama my first year at Columbia University Libraries in my capacity as its new digital scholarship coordinator. She was one of several humanists I approached during that first year, when the task at hand was to meet as many of them as I could, to see who manifested unruly desires to go beyond Microsoft Word and Facebook. That first coffee consisted of the usual: an update on the construction of an alternative scholarly record under the banner of digital humanities. Humanist Glover seemed particularly skeptical, and I did not expect to see her again other than at the occasional panel on campus—which was a bummer, because I was particularly keen to work with my Caribbean studies colleagues, having spent the better part of my dwindling moments of research solitude focused on Caribbean poetry in the twentieth century.

Little did Kaiama know that I had begun my professional work in interpreting humanist dreams more than a decade ago through the analysis of my own Caribbean digital dreams—pace *Die Traumdeutung*. Around 2004, still a graduate worker, my dream was to build a digital archive of Caribbean literature, with no clue how one would go about it. Once upon a time I was her . . . in a sense.

With James Arnold as principal investigator (because graduate workers cannot have such ambitions on the official record), a group of us received a Rockefeller Foundation grant to sojourn a week at the Bellagio Center in Lake Como. The goal was to discuss the creation of a digital archive of Caribbean literature with an international team of prominent Caribbeanists and two librarian/technologist dream interpreters: Daniel Pitti, codirector of the Institute for Advanced Technologies in the Humanities (IATH), and Matthew Gibson, from the University of Virginia's (UVA) historical E-text Center, both based in the UVA Library. We were all unaware that similar conversations were happening in Florida around the formation of dLOC. We were also quite an overwhelming bunch for our two lone interpreters in residence, who—try as they might—could not ground the large gathering of Laputans in the realities of a digital archive of this magnitude. The latter, overwhelmed in turn by reality, seemed to prefer grappling with the tensions between high and vernacular poetics in the region and thus dedicated themselves to dividing epistemological duties for the imagined archive.

Unsurprisingly, the meeting was a failure, although one that would bear fruit in surprising ways. Although the desired archive never saw the light of day, I nevertheless was able to understand why the scholars and the librarian technologists could not see eye to eye: the book-

'n'-article scholars' digital dreams were unbound—a paradox for such a format-bound crew—and the interpreters, themselves little interested in the minutiae of Caribbean studies, only had limited airtime to ground those dreams. One could say these were still the early years of such labor relations between dreamers and interpreters, and though IATH had helped pioneer these sorts of connections in the 1990s at UVA, it was already at capacity in the 2000s. Needless to say, the encounter marked the beginning of my own journey to becoming a professional librarian/technologist/dream interpreter—first, imagined as a vehicle for my own scholarly dreams and then in the equally rewarding work of building and joining collectives.

Fast-forward a decade from our short-lived confederacy in the Alps—skipping over a training montage at the Scholars' Lab and a detour into global digital humanities and experimental methods—and we arrive at my second encounter with Kaiama, when she sought me out at the library.

Somewhat astonishingly, given our initial dead-end conversation, Kaiama approached me again, this time manifesting clear symptoms of a digital nature. At first, she did not tell me of her dream to chart an Afro-Atlantic Republic of Letters in the Twentieth Century, what we now call *In the Same Boats*. Instead, she was curious about the lay of the land and hungry for some experimental experience involving other colleagues. Together with David Scott and Brent Edwards, we set about organizing our first "conference," the aforementioned *Legacies of Césaire*.[vi] That event served us well in allaying some of the anxieties of the New York City Caribbean studies community about digital humanities. "I never knew DH could be critical," gasped a distinguished colleague, and we knew we done good. After the conference, and with the incredible collaborative energy of Kelly Baker Josephs, we set about building a carefully designed para-structure—our journal and annual conference—both important forums for the hitherto scattered, but energized digital Caribbeanist community. This was, in my estimate at the time, the perfect complement to the work of dLOC, which I had long since discovered, linked up with, and become a serious fan of by then, and whose stewards had given themselves the ambitious task of building a robust network of institutions to aggregate digital archives in and for the Caribbean.[vii]

It was only after this year or so of our burgeoning digital choreography that we ended up with Kaiama's *Same Boats* dream on my desk. As with most other dreamers adjusting to the light outside the tower, Kaiama wanted to engrave the contents of her beautiful mind in sentient

pixels: “and you’ll be able to see the trajectories of all Black Atlantic historical figures in one interactive map, and you’ll move across time and space, and you’ll see who met who where and when, and who influenced who and how.”

“Draw it for me,” I interrupted, trained in the arts of colored pencils and resistance in the materials.[viii] After an epiphanic silence, “starry-eyed, enlightened” Kaiama went back to the tower, to return a few days later—somewhat ragged, but with a few rudimentary drawings of a map and a timeline. She was ready. We were ready.

I called us to the Butler Library Studio, where for some years now we have been doing inadequately staffed and under-resourced interpretation work. I invited graduate visualization workers Emily Fuhrman (master of subtle visual transubstantiation and D3 resident expert), Buck Wanner (brilliant map storyteller and D3-curious), and Tola Ojulari (student of digital architectures), my intern from Kwara State University that year. We immediately introduced Kaiama to the whiteboard dream resistance technique (WDRT). The WDRT consists of taking the early version of the dreamer’s wire frame and staging a few conversations among interpreters on workflow and requirements, in front of the dreamer, to reduce the scope of the project to a minimally viable interpretation in which the dreamer still recognizes her initial desires. During the process, interpreters make it a point to speak clearly on the technological stack using trade terms (JSON, CSV, JavaScript, D3, etc.), spelling out the number of hours and amount of resources that it will take for various interpretations, and outlining what the dreamer will be expected to learn and contribute in kind. The dreamer is allowed to intervene *only sparingly* to answer questions. The goal of the WDRT is to prevent scope creep from the outset and for all parties involved to begin the process of transference to a model of shared ownership—the transmutation from individual dream to the collective dream of a creative, shared reality.

In the first iterations of our whiteboard scribbles, Kaiama was able to see that a dot on a map cannot have too many meanings, that a line can be overdetermined, and that color and font can be put to work. Chisel by chisel, we were able to glean what meanings could be carried by the components on an actual screen: those meanings we could capture from other scholars working with spreadsheets and those we could infer algorithmically and graphically based on those entries. My job was to make sure we resisted the unbounded version of the dream as much as possible in order to make the dream come true without wars and famine. Most dreams left unchecked, after all, devolve in time to an unhealthy obsession with more relational clickety-

click, zombie-projects and no-projects, or, worse, unmet expectations—the tragicomic fate of those who imagine a canvas where there are only circuits and labor or, much worse, expropriative empires of solo dreams masked under the banner of pedagogy. In certain of the latter cases, a cadre of students is asked to present large amounts of data in forms or spreadsheets, without there being any real lesson behind it; in others, a student is asked to constantly add changes to the design—minor on the surface, large in terms of labor—while the "dreamer" takes all credit as the *auteur*.

Of course, in this case it helped that we were working with Kaiama, who presumes the possibility of the marvelous and persists in believing that a dream come true need not mean deference. What others may have heard as a no, Kaiama heard as a go. Good.

Since we were interested in pursuing a minimal computing architecture for our interpretation—which proved to be an intellectual challenge for the interpreters—we chiseled down to a minimally viable infrastructure, workflow, and purse string.[ix] In particular, we wanted to design a series of visualizations without a database to maintain and that would result in a reduction in computation and bandwidth cost to our publics. This very form of thinking about technology, at least for me, comes precisely from my experiences as a Caribbean scholar, working with Caribbean hardware and bandwidth, raised on baseball games narrated from transistor radios hooked up to car batteries. Work was already well on its way at the studio to build similar approaches for digital editions (Ed), digital archives (Wax), and academic journals (*archipelagos journal*). Mapping and visualization seemed like the perfect next avenue of exploration. In terms of architecture, we designed a workflow from Google Spreadsheets to CSV to JSON to D3 and an SVG map, wrapped in static web pages that should make the finished project easier to maintain and deploy as a whole, regardless of bandwidth or even connectivity.

These visualizations in particular seemed original to us, not only in terms of the architecture but also in import. The dreams of the humanist too easily could have ended up piped into existing visualization frameworks or even some D3 templates by less experienced practitioners. But in our case, the interpreters made the work *interesting to themselves* by exploiting the fortuitous intersection between cultural analytics and knowledge architectures. No one that we know of had tried to map intellectual lives this way. The closest to us was the *Six Degrees of Francis Bacon* project, and our visualizations were fundamentally different to the eyes of the connoisseur.[x] In short, we were calculating implied intersections in space and time by

crowdsourcing granular biographical data from experts. Simple, yet powerful and untried.

Long after our initial interpretation work, we were joined by Alyssa Vann (interpreter in the making from Stanford working at the intersection of computer science and Caribbean studies) and the Agile Humanities team in Canada (a brilliant team of digital humanists), all of whom in their own way polished the code and made the architecture more robust. The work of interpretation continued apace with these new arrivals, of course, and we returned as needed to a whiteboard or a specs requirement document, but the ground had been set for the transmutation from dream to collective interpretation.

Kaiama and Alex's Still-Dreamy Humanist-Technologist Reality

The relationship between "dreamer" and "interpreter" on the contemporary stage of digital scholarship is overdetermined by changes in the division of labor within modern university and research libraries, which are driven in part by the new demands presented by the rise of a hybrid scholarly record: part digital, part analog. A new batch of so-called alt-ac digital scholars, frequently with PhDs, have been hired in the last decade across the United States to play the roles of digital interpreters and implementers alongside other coding labor groups within libraries.[xi] Most of these positions bear the title "digital humanities/scholarship coordinator/librarian." Very few research universities have dedicated teams of full-time employees focusing on digital humanities proper; as a result, many of these alt-ac positions involve one person singlehandedly doing the work of a team. These individuals often find themselves faced with the impossible mandate of meeting digital humanities demands across campus and, where those demands do not exist, creating them.[xii] In most of these cases, those who occupy these positions have to be adept in navigating faculty, various semi-related professional units of the library, and the broader scholarly ecosystem in an effort to form impromptu teams.

Because of the contemporary, de facto supporting role of libraries, with faculty cast as protagonists or patrons—and students seen as raw labor, depending on the situation—it is presumed that ideas come from faculty and that the "miracle workers" take care of execution. Yet the "unicorns," almost by definition, are folks who devoted a significant portion of their graduate careers to becoming proficient in multiple advanced computational forms of labor, in

addition to meeting the same requirements as other humanists who received the highest degree in the land. Once in the professional world, those in "miracle worker" roles are accorded little time to realize their own scholarly dreams. They are expected to work on the ideas of those without technological skills—colleagues who do not always understand the material reality of digital frameworks and thus come looking for miracles, bearing projects that are often unrealistic and ill advised. This is the unspoken truth underlying the techno-phobias and techno-philias currently shaping digital scholarship roles on Higher Ed campuses today. "How do you feel about working on other people's research instead of your own?" is a common question heard in job interviews for these positions.

We decided to write this chapter as a corrective to abuse or disappointment in the new relationships born out of this arrangement, as much as to celebrate our joint Caribbean digital work. In the ideal scenario—enjoyed, it must be noted, by several actual teams today (i.e., this actually *is* possible, folks)—interpreters would work in dedicated teams with a good portion of their work-year allotted to their own research pursuits, and with ample prerogative to choose partners. For those working in situations where they must improvise teams and struggle to find time for their own scholarship, the ability to take *real* co-ownership of projects is key. Insofar as "original ideas" are a surface effect of the labor structure in the academy, we have attempted to lay out clearly through our fairytale-cum-history the transition from dreaming to interpretation and to shift value to the latter. Paradoxically, this can only happen when the interpreters themselves imbue their own dreams into a project.

With every magical feature Kaiama dreamed of, the team met it with a "no, that's impossible, but here's what we can do"—or "no, that won't work, but we see what you mean and here's a workaround." And then, of course, there were those truly magical moments where Kaiama was able to articulate a detail of her dream in the language and within the parameters we had been offering to her over the months of our work together. There came a point, in other words, where the processes of both dreaming and interpretation became shared across skill sets—where all involved became equally implicated in a dreamy version of what this *Same Boats* story could be and equally committed to making sure it hewed to the real parameters of existing resources.

As we write these words, we are entering the final stage of platform design and the middle stage of data collection. We have all manner of future dream schemes in the works. Our

former graduate coworkers have had a chance to present on the project and have been credited appropriately for their brilliant interpretive labor; our current graduate collaborator, Soraya Limare, is helping the project to the finish line, learning-by-doing all the way along. Agile Humanities has leveraged our contract to adopt some of the minimal architectures and workflows to reduce their costs in providing visualization and mapping services. Biographical contributors to *In the Same Boats* will learn more about the figures they study and, as is already the case for some, will collaborate through our network. As our community of contributors grows, we now dare to imagine—to dream—that the very way of working in Caribbean studies will be transformed as well.

And is that not the point: to help build the dreams that build up our own? To be truly in the same boats?

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Notes

[i] *Legacies of Césaire.*

[ii] *The Digital Black Atlantic*.

[iii] *archipelagos journal*.

[iv] We have worked and continue to work closely with the illustrious coeditor of this very volume, Kelly Baker Josephs, both in the original conception of *archipelagos* and in the ongoing production of "The Caribbean Digital."

[v] Glover and Gil, *In the Same Boats.*

[vi] *Legacies of Césaire.*

[vii] Digital Library of the Caribbean.

[viii] Bethany Nowviskie, "Resistance in the Materials."

[ix] Minimal Computing Working Group, *Minimal Computing*.

[x] *Six Degrees of Francis Bacon*.

[xi] These scholarly formations were perhaps best described thoroughly in *#alt-academy*, a Media Commons project, in 2013. The term has now become common currency in digital scholarship circles.

[xii] A professional discussion group of folks in these roles has formed at the Digital Library Federation under the direction of Alex Gil and Leigh Bonds. The group was originally given the tongue-in-cheek name, the "Miracle Workers." Paige Morgan, digital humanities librarian at the University of Miami, argued strongly that the irony could be lost on some; a few others agreed, so the group was renamed the Digital Scholarship Working Group. In this chapter, we decided to contrast the fairytale (embodied in the "unicorn") with the clear take-home message, given the extent to which we remain obliged to negotiate and transition from one to the other in our everyday professional relationships around digital scholarship.