

Transcript for Video 1 (Interview) of “On Counterdesign, Globalizing History, and the Black Digital Humanities: An Interview with Keon Pettiway.” From *Doing Digital Visual Studies: One Image, Multiple Methodologies*.

<https://www.ccdigitalpress.org/book/ddvs/chapters/pettiway.html>

Laurie Gries:

All right. Keon, thank you so much for being here – I should say Dr. Pettiway. I cannot thank you enough for contributing to this collection. You're going to bring such a unique and valuable perspective to the project, and so I'm really excited to pick your brain. I want to begin by – you have the unique opportunity of having worked both within and outside the academy. And so for our readers, give us a little bit of your background in its relation to visual studies and then tell us what you're up to now.

Keon Pettiway:

Sure, well first of all, thank you for having me. I am thankful, humbled, appreciative and also very appreciative of the work that you've done in our field. I've been inspired by it, as I know others have, so thank you for your contribution and your team's work on the new book project, so I really appreciate and honor you for what you're doing in the field. So, appreciate it.

So, my background is quite interesting in how I came into rhetoric and then how I came into design and now how I'm back in design. I started out, actually, at least in my academic journey wasn't in rhetoric and it wasn't in communication. It was actually in computer science and computer engineering. And then I found out I was interested in kind of these deeper critical questions, so I started studying the philosophy of science and then found my way actually into Africana studies. And so my academic journey really started out with understanding science and technology from an Africana studies perspective and what does it bring to bear on thinking about those kind of interstices. How I ended up in rhetoric is quite interesting because I was always interested in the communication of science, of technology, thinking about what does communication look like from an Africana-centered perspective and what does it bring to bear on our communication activities and the way we research communication and study it. And so later, I found my way—you know I started working in design as a designer, of course, in a creative space, and later I found I wanted to move into design research and gain an MFA in design, and I had a bunch of opportunities actually go into private practice, go into academia as a design professor, or take a whole different route and do advanced studies and communication and rhetoric as it relates to the design environment. So, I did what any thrill seeker would do: I took up the challenge and did the hardest thing, perhaps. I said “those other things I've done. I can do. I want a challenge.” And I also wanted to figure out how to expand my design research and practice from a rhetorical perspective, being aware of the intersection

between rhetoric and design, teaching rhetoric and design at East Carolina School of Art and Design.

That's kind of the long-winded way of getting to rhetoric, but later I was an Assistant Professor of Communication at Eastern Michigan University where I taught graduate and undergraduate courses in rhetorical theory and rhetorical criticism and race. And the opportunity came up to again do another hard thing--and I'm a firm believer that sometimes the hardest thing that is for you to do is, perhaps, the thing that you should be doing. So I entered back into the design field because I was interested in understanding how do we now think about rhetoric and communication as the innovative force to develop the kind of products that we're seeing in our contemporary world. What do I have to say, not only in terms of how the products are being developed, but the communication practices internally in an organization that goes into making these products. What do I bring to bear as a rhetorical scholar and how can I do uh my work in the private design field in addition to some community work that I'm doing? So, that's where I am. I still will return to academia in some shape or form, but for now, I'm doing the hardest thing.

Laurie Gries:

I love that. I once read that Lawrence Lessig and President Obama had this notion that you should do things for about 10 years and then after 10 years you switch because it enables you the opportunity to always stay humble, to keep challenging yourself, to keep learning, and I love that. I mean I try to think about that in terms of my own kind of book project or sets of related projects. So, now I'm off in some other kind of territory, in part, because it's challenging me to think differently and to use different ways of doing research and communicating. And it is so challenging. You have to start from all over again in some respects, so I appreciate that trajectory and wish you all the best, but glad that you're still very much participating as a public intellectual and a researcher for the academy, and I'm really excited to hear about the current projects you're working on.

Keon Pettiway:

Thank you. Let's start with just – you know, I'm interested, obviously, in your thoughts about this particular project and some of the work you saw going on in the digital visual studies collection. And maybe, we can talk about that a little bit, and then I want to start gathering your thoughts about where DVS can go from here, especially from, as you put it, an Africana perspective but also thinking about integrating the black digital humanities with digital visual studies and where we can go from here. I'm also going to ask you questions about what we can learn, what advice can you give future scholars wanting to do this work based on your experience with not only the virtual MLK project but also the new Global King project because

that's what it's called, right? So we'll kind of hit upon all that, but let's just start with, I don't know, the book itself.

Keon Pettiway:

Great. I loved so many facets of the book, and, in particular, what--the premise of the book really mirrors the ways in which, I think, that in our field how we need to sustain some attention on one particular artifact and look at it through a prism, right? We typically move on to the next project, to the next project, to the next project, and, of course, some of us stick with particular topics all throughout our career. But one thing that I loved about the book project is that it takes this artifact and then spins it around and says "now what happens when you look at it from this perspective, what do we learn? And when we do it this way, what do we learn?" rather than taking multiple artifacts, because you don't get to see that kind-- the uniqueness of the ways in which that image can be looked at or studied or reproduced in a myriad of ways. And I think that is so valuable because it provides a great case study to say "if we look at these multiple ways of doing methods, what does it open up for us? What does it close down for us?" And I think it truly provides a unique way of thinking about doing digital visual studies.

One particular aspect that I really loved about it is that it also was a site of reproduction in addition to critical analysis and archival work. I think we needed -- as a--for our field, we need to do more of that. That was sort of the impetus for the Virtual MLK project, that it was one thing to talk about what we know to be true or our hypothesis to be true, but if we think about it in the form of a scientific experiment, right, that you have your hypothesis, you go and test it, so forth and so on. I kind of think about the ways in which we do humanities -- particularly digital humanities and digital visual research -- is that we kind of take that--and we already do this, we just maybe don't frame it in the same ways--but we have a hypothesis about how things are working, but we also still need to test it, right? We need to actually do some AB testing. We need to set up what are the conditions where these things may or may not work, and what I love about the book is that it does offer both the traditional things that we normally do in our studies, but it also opens it up to say "but we need to do this other part, too, right. The reproduction is actually a form of critique. It's a form of analysis, making as a form of analysis, and we need to do more. Here's some ways to do it." I love that about the book.

The other particular thing that I loved about the book is the, is the attention that it put on the racial politics of circulation and also thinking about how do we conduct archive from thinking about it as a queer practice? How do you queer the digital visual studies? And the attention and the focus to those particular ways of thinking about what we do, I think, are so critical because it's one way to do it as a form of critique, but again in the book it shows and how you can also reproduce it. And here's the other part that I love about it. You can also challenge these infrastructures and that itself becomes a site of practice.

A point in particular, for instance, in the chapter about doing queer archival research, one of the scholars that were that was mentioned was Matthew Vetter, who's one of my colleagues. And Vetter and I wrote a piece on doing a queer media media practice when creating Wikipedia articles, and in our discussions, you know, sans the article, much of what we talked about was how do we do these things as a form of activism ourselves? We're writing about it, we're critiquing it, but we want to do something. We want to put something out into the sphere as a form of counter design or counter rhetoric, if you will. I think is so important to think about making not only as a form of critique, making as a site of play, but when we make, what we put out into the world is also a way to counter some of these forces and practices that we see at play.

Laurie Gries:

Yeah, I love that too. My current project – I don't know if I told you this but I've been – so when Trump was, during his administration, I started tracking the uptick of swastikas that were appearing on the streets. And I'm trying now – so I've collected over a thousand instances in which swastikas have shown up, and what we've been doing is also documenting the horrendous words that they're showing up with, as well as the other kind of visual signs, and then looking also at how communities have been responding. But what's been really interesting now, now that we've coded and double coded the data, is thinking about how we can create a digital public humanities project that itself acts as a counter and an intervention into some of the problems that are being disclosed through the project. So, I love that notion of counter design. Could you talk a little bit more about that? What does that entail for you?

Keon Pettitway:

It's a form of practice from critical race design, and it takes a page from critical race theory whereby counter story is a significant methodology to address some of the forces that are at play. There's a number of scholars, especially in composition and rhetoric, who use counter story as a particular approach for pedagogy but also as activism as well. Basically, the counter story is a way to both make visible the mega stories, as it's called, the mega stories and then find a way to create counter stories to what seems to be the status quo, which we know of course is riddled with all kinds of injustices--when we think about the way in which stories get made or who can who lays claim to tell the story. But counter story really comes from the critical race theory tradition, and I have taken a page from that, and in my work and in my research, I use counter design as a methodological and a theoretical conceptual approach to design both as a site of study but also as a site of praxis.

Laurie Gries:

Oh wonderful. Give us some examples of your own work with counter design, and then maybe we can begin to imagine future projects that DVS can get involved with to contribute to these efforts.

Keon Pettitway:

Yeah, one particular project where I tried to truly embody a site – well, let me back up. So, one article that Dr. Melissa Johnson and I wrote on African American museums, we noted that the ways in which museums are presenting themselves and the ways in which visuals are represented on their websites is actually a form of counter practice, right. And that these are not only new forms, but it's a common practice, particularly in the African American tradition of creating things in the environment that actually counter these other hegemonic forces. So, call it, may it be communication practices or may it be, for instance, magazines as a way as a form of counter practice, right? You think about a *Jet Magazine* and a number of others. In my own work, particularly for the Virtual MLK project, when I thought about – at that time, I was the lead experience designer, so I was designing the museum exhibitions and also leading the charge of how do we try to adapt our exhibition for different spaces is not the same story-- counter design was at the top of my thinking and my framing, right? That if we went to Kansas, if we went to Alabama, if we went to North Carolina, if we went to Virginia, what we should be doing is designing the exhibition in such a way that counters some of the regional forces, right, that are, that are at play. So, it's not just you take whatever you did in North Carolina, bring the same thing to Alabama. They're dealing with different forces all but the same. What we're presenting is a way of countering some of those some of those visions, some of those misunderstandings about history.

If I could give a particular practical example. For the Virtual MLK project, a lot of people thought that this was all about King. This is, perhaps, the most commented thing that we get from participants, right, is that we thought this was all about King, but it's so rich in its stories, right. And that was a form of counter design, of moving against the kind of patriarchal view of Civil Rights history, which is well known, right. And it also gets beyond this kind of one-person view of the Civil Rights movement, which a lot of people have talked about--that King had a lot of help, of course, and he was influenced by a lot of people. For me, and I think certainly for others on the team, the project was a way to counter that notion--that the Civil Rights movement was also, was symbolic of King, that he did the work. So, a practical example is the photographs that would, that I would show, that we would show, is photographs of people who are actually from the local region, who, for all intents and purposes people didn't know who they were. So it wasn't, they weren't the big names. They weren't the Kings. They weren't the

typical kind of arch nemesis either, right. They weren't the Bull Connors who were featuring in these in these stories. So, what we would do is actually locate archives that were either in private collections or even in public collections, and we would say "okay, there's a lot of photos that we could use, but which of these perhaps has something interesting to say or kind of challenges the kind of normal notions of what we know about Civil Rights history?" So, one thing that I chose to do, and I put forth to the team, and we said "okay, this is a good strategy, let's move forward with it," is to showcase children. Some of the photographs that we were put in the exhibition, they did not include King. They included a lot of young folk, particularly children, who were part of what was happening in Durham, North Carolina. The kind of counter design that brings to the fore is that the Civil Rights movement was also led by young folk, right. And when I say young folk, I mean tiny people, and they were also at the forefront, and what it does now is create a conversation. Now people start to think and go "hmm, now what was the impact on those little kids being involved in such, these kinds of conditions? This kind of moment?" We know about King, but you got tiny little folk who are on the front lines. They're actually out protesting, they're out putting their body in harm's way during a particular time where the results, certainly at times, were deadly. It then starts to bring up these kind of conversations that counter what people thought they knew about Civil Rights history, and I would say even the longitudinal impact. Those were the kids grew up to become older adults and what kinds of things that they now still carry with them now, right, even until their adulthood--that they're impacted by these photographs that we see of young folk in North Carolina, adolescents in North Carolina who were protesting against segregation.

Laurie Gries:

Right, that leads me into another question I had. It's a perfect segue. I was recently watching a talk in which you were talking about what it means to do rhetorical history and to do Civil Rights history, and one of the points that I believe that you were making is that we need to think – when we're doing this kind of historical work, we need to think beyond just recovery. We need to think about—and the particular verbs you used were experiencing, remembering, and then maybe it was recovery. Was that the last one, I think. But help us understand what the distinctions are between those. And if, say, future DVS scholars want to do archival work and do this kind of important counter design with history, help us understand the distinctions and the connections between experiencing, remembering, and recovering that are so important to these endeavors.

Keon Pettitway:

Yeah, so I'll start with recovery and the ways in which that term, and the way that we define it in relation to history, might not cover all of the aspects of what we should be doing when we're

talking about rhetorical history. Recovery could be thought of as, in some ways, archiving--doing some kind of study in such a way that brings things that have been lost to memory, bringing them to the fore. Now, when we think about it just from a technical or a practical perspective, now the praxis of recovery may mean going into existing archives, maybe your local or national libraries or international libraries or online resources....It's not only what we're recovering, but it's also how we're recovering. So, recovery does something; it gets us to a certain space, and it means that we were actually able to recover kind of lost data or data that was constricted and restricted, or data that was lost to memory. Maybe it was put forth in the public at one time, but we kind of lost sight of it.

But there's a few things that recovery in that kind of traditional--and I don't know if I would say a traditional sense but maybe recovery in a sense of merely going to the archives and digging up artifacts and bringing them to the fore that it only gets us at, to so much. Here's some things that recovery does not do. It does not deal with the everyday experience of African American and Black life....If I could take, perhaps, the example of the photographs of the young children who were involved in the protests in Durham, North Carolina particularly for desegregation. And, on the one hand, maybe that is a site of recovery--that we're bringing forth these photographs and making them visible for a large...audience[s]. What it does not do, however, it does not recover the everyday experience of the people who are involved or the generational trauma or the generational legacy of what happened. And so, by troubling what we mean by recovery, and we say we also need to think about recovering experience, means that now we actually have to do more qualitative studies. Not only do we have to go to the archives, we have to think about people as archives, those who live those moments, and not only those who lived it, but those who were impacted by it. In some areas, particularly in health communication and in health studies, people talk about that it's not only those who have the ailment, it's also people who are living with the ailment, the people who are around them, people who take care of them, people who are their families who continually see the impact it has on one's bodies. I would say that thinking about experience as a site of recovery means that in many ways, those of us in rhetorical history have to do some of that hard work. We have to go and actually go into communities, and sometimes it may be uncomfortable. Especially in African-American Black communities, there's always been a history of folk coming to "study," coming to gather study, gather research. So, I think as rhetorical historians, we have to deal with that legacy, deal with that uncomfortable environment, and figure out how is it that we can capture people's experiences and not only simply recover them from traditional archives and newer archives....I think, in that sense, it just expands what we consider to be recovery for rhetorical history.

I think restoration also lies in the fact that we have to recover alternate constructions of humanity that have been excluded. This is one of the things that Kim Gallon talks about. ... The alternate constructions of humanity may come by way of actually doing interviews with people who have been impacted by that of which we're studying. In terms of remembering, of course, recovery is one part of that remembrance. The digital archives may host the kind of way in

which we remember, but we also have to think about when we recover, it's also quite fraught. Who gets to remember? Who wrote about that that remembering? The cultural nuances of what it means to remember. I can think of perhaps the Fourth of July as one example of how that remembering in memory can be quite fraught. Every year we celebrate the Fourth of July as a kind of jubilant kind of atmosphere, but as Frederick Douglass famously said, right, what does the Fourth of July mean to enslaved folk? And what I think that does in terms of challenging recovery is that it actually talks against the ways in which the archives that we're using, we also have to bring to fore some of those, perhaps, not so good memories. In addition to saying "hey, we've found these archives, we've recovered them, we're putting them on display," we also have to talk about the other side of it, which in some of those may be in a sense who got to recover those projects, right, even in terms of the researchers. Let's remember who was actually conducting this work and how that might trouble the core. I hope that speaks to it. I think generally that experience, remembering, and recovery or ways to kind of have this tripartite way of doing rhetorical history that isn't just simply going to the archives. Oh, I think you may still be on mute.

Laurie Gries:

Oh yeah, you're right. I was thinking about in your explanation of recovery, experience, and restoration, that there's also this, if we think of remembering as re-membling, so you're bringing more members into play that have been previously unacknowledged for various reasons, good or bad, right. So, it's interesting just to play with that.

Keon Pettiway:

I love that. If I could speak to that. At least the ways in which this happened with the BMLK project is that--this the notion of having the "re-members," right--is we actually use the project as a way to bring forth generational voices. Because the way current generations and newer generations experience what was put forth in the exhibitions were different than the people who were actually there. It was interesting because it was a way to help a kind of generational re-memory. Re-mory. Because some of those things may get lost even in African-American Black communities. But was remembered by one generation sometimes gets remembered differently by other generations. I think some ways the way the work that we're doing actually has a way to bridge those kind of generational aspects of memory.

Laurie Gries:

Yeah, I love that. Thank you so much for doing that work.

I'm going to be talking about that project specifically with Vicki and Candice too, so I'm excited the readers will get to hear more about that. I really appreciate you explaining how counter design came into play in that particular project. You mentioned Kim Gallon in your last--in your response. And so we know that Kim has done a lot with forwarding the Black Digital Humanities, which I know that you know quite a bit about and is important to your own work and some of your important projects going on right now.

Tell us about your work and how you have put those tenants to work, so readers can begin to imagine how to enact that and how to live up to, I think, the responsibilities of the technology of recovery as articulated by Gallon. Because it's one thing to articulate something in theory, and it's another thing to actually put those into practice, and the work you're doing I know is doing a nice job on that, so I'd just love for the readers to hear more about that.

Keon Pettiway:

Yeah, I'll talk on, maybe about, a few of these tenants. I'll talk about the fourth tenant, which is foregrounding the digital as a mutual host for racism while also fostering alternative constructions. And I'll talk about them in a very specific case for Virtual MLK.

When we worked on Virtual MLK, the way in which the exhibition kind of expanded is very interesting because it started out as being only for one particular locale, and then we adapted it for other locales and expanded it to different spaces and different experiences in one space. One of the things that has always been--since I've been practicing counter design and before thinking about it as such--is that the tools that we use could actually foster a way of privileging some folk to speak and others not to speak. And I'll take it just as far as the kind of tool that we're using or the type of tool that we're using to allow people to participate. So in the field of design, there are a number of traditional design tools that we use. Now it's Figma. It was once Photoshop. A lot of people are still using Sketch and a lot of other Adobe products. And you would think that the exhibition that was created for Virtual MLK utilized a lot of these traditional kind of tools, but one of the things that stood out to me so much, and especially being a designer and teaching design and practicing design, was that these tools that we use actually could be a host for perpetuating some of the same things that that racism does and, that is, lock people out from participating. If we wanted to allow other teams, and not even other teams. I'm even saying that we decenter what we know as a role of a designer or exhibition designer and actually say, what if we invite other community members to actually be designers, right? The tools that we use actually shut those folk out from participating because it's actually both in relation to class and also related to race, particularly as it means to access. Could you imagine, maybe perhaps, inviting folk from the community who their means of production isn't some of the core design tools or the fancy design tools, right? Could you imagine bringing those community members into any Digital Humanities projects and say, now I would like you to collaborate with us and co-design with us in this space? They don't know

what to do with that tool. That's not their forte. But more importantly, these tools that we are afforded, particularly in some universities who have bigger pockets, we're afforded to actually utilize tools that other folk don't even have access to.

Laurie Gries:

Right, right. I'm thinking too, in terms of that tenet, of Safiya Noble's point that we also need to be aware of the consequences of the digital technologies themselves and their contributions to environmental racism and disproportionate impact on minoritized communities. I mean, how do we--what do we do with it when we're thinking about it on that level? I mean, I was really struck -- I'm not struggling with it, I wholeheartedly believe it, but I'm like, how does that get played out? I love this point about software, but what happens when we actually interrogate it and take responsibility for complicity at the level of the production of the technologies themselves that constitute the software?

Keon Pettiway:

Yeah, I agree it can be a difficult thing because we're trying to juggle so many tasks and things you want to look at, right, and, in some ways, we have to figure out what's going to be in scope and what's out of scope. What I think we can do, and what Kim Gallon kind of helps scholars bring to the fore, is that we have to foreground it. That's our starting point, and then it becomes a little bit easier because we don't have to worry about where it fits in. We know that at that outset, that's what we do. It's kind of a muscle memory, if you will. I research muscle memory, and we don't even have to think about whether or not or how it's embedded, we just know that it is. It's more so the case that it is, and this is where Critical Race Theory also helps us scholars kind of foreground that by thinking about technology as not exempt from issues of race and racism. We have to think at the outset, it already does. And if we do that, then we already know that anything that we do, we're already complicit. We already know that that the things that we're using could be a host. Now the impetus is on us to say, now that we know that's a starting point, what's our ethical standard to make sure we address that in our research?

Laurie Gries:

Right, right, which gets really hard when our research is relying on these technologies that we know are complicit in these institutional systems.

Keon Pettiway:

Exactly. You can't get out of it,

Laurie Gries:

You can't get out of it. Yeah.

Keon Pettiway:

You can't get out of it. And I think, perhaps, that's the hardest sell because, on the one hand, the work that we're doing is noble and the work that we're doing is trying to usurp some of these issues, but, at the same time, to start with the notion that the tool that you're using probably perpetuates racism, and a lot of other isms if you will, and if we start there, it, perhaps, creates, for lack of better term, it makes the pill a little bit easier to swallow because we know that it's there and we have to deal with it.

Laurie Gries:

Yeah.

Keon Pettiway:

If I could just to answer that as well, I think in some ways, Kim Gallon's seventh tenant helps us with that. What she says in her seventh tenant is that DH projects should be led by or heavily involve Black scholars, and I think by heavily involving Black scholars and projects, it's not merely the fact that Black scholars, our bodies, are present, right the Black body is present, though that that that means a lot as well just the presence of Black scholars. But I think also when you think about Black scholars, particularly those who come from a Black Studies tradition or they use a Black Studies tradition in their work, they're gonna bring that knowledge with them. In my own work, a lot of my work is led by the fact that I come from a Black Studies, Africana Studies tradition, and when I design, when I'm doing Digital Humanities work, or when I'm studying communication, that is my frame of reference.... When I am starting to develop digital projects and in terms of Digital Visual Studies, my framework is coming from a Black Studies tradition that questions these very things that we're trying to question.

Laurie Gries:

Right. I think a lot....I love...I just so appreciate how you're speaking to this. I'm thinking about a project – I brought in an augmented reality artist to our campus, and we had a workshop. We had a bunch of students from a different university, undergraduate students, come, and they were explaining how they were using augmented reality to create all of these games, right? So this young student – you know, I don't mean young, this undergraduate student--don't mean to be condescending here at all--got up and spoke about their project, and it was really fascinating. But it was a project in where they were imagining that people would be using augmented and virtual reality applications to kind of explore public space. So, I asked the question, I was like “okay, so how does this app work for people who aren't able to move through space so easily? Who are often, when they move through space, are surveilled and limited? And I didn't mean to be snarky or anything, but the question went just right over the student's head. It was just to me a glaring example of how important not only the humanities are to the intentional process of design, but also Critical Race Studies. Right. I mean we have to be thinking about these important issues from the very inception of the ideas of some of these projects, including Digital Visual projects.

Keon Pettiway:

Yeah, I agree. And I think what's interesting about that is, for Kim Gallon, by making sure that we probe...and disrupt these notions of humanity, not only both who is presented, right, but also challenging these kind of traditional notions of who can be present, which humans, if you will, can be present to experience the work that we are trying to put forth. And it's something that, that I also mentioned, and we all made a point of this on the Virtual MLK project, is that it's one thing to say you want to take this project to the Smithsonian, we want to take our project to the Hunt Library in North Carolina, we want to take it to a lot of other spaces, but these spaces are also very privileged spaces, not only in terms of their construction but also the construction of time is a privileged space. The fact that we have an exhibition that happens at one o'clock in the afternoon--I don't even have to go into detail about who can attend those meetings at those exhibitions on Wednesdays at one o'clock pm. When we think about class, and we think about the different ways in which the work schedules that people have, there's a lot of folk who can't attend. When we think about ability-- this was a significant factor--is that it's one thing for us to host and curate and try to be rhetorical stewards of these stories, but it's another thing to say we're going to go into spaces that also aren't accessible for the broadest base of people to attend. And I think that again, Kim Gallon's work, right, by foregrounding not only the tools that we're using but the ways in which we privilege who can attend, who can't attend, who can be involved, who can't be involved, and probably is already a mutual host.

Laurie Gries:

Right, yeah, that's such a powerful notion. Keon, your video went out. Is there a way to correct that?

Keon Pettiway:

Oh yes, I'm so sorry. Let me get that back up for you, sorry. While I'm getting – I think it's just a brief technical glitch. I'll get it back up here. We can keep talking though. We can keep going. I'll try to get it up here, sorry.

Laurie Gries:

That's all right. Yeah, I mean that's such a profound notion in terms of the responsibilities and the commitments to really thinking about, going back to a term you used, kind of using the Digital Humanities to help restore humanity for you know for a lot of people who haven't had that honor in our particular culture, but also across the globe.

Keon Pettiway:

Exactly, and I think that too, it's so intricate in terms of the impact because now this is just on the point of talking about the actual research, right. But now we get into another bag of bones, if you will, and that is the ways in which our disciplines, particularly our professional practice, privileges certain kind of work whereby it does not allow us or it restricts us to actually serve in the communities the way that we should through our Digital Humanities work. If I could give a particular case in point.

Laurie Gries:

Please.

Keon Pettiway:

Of course. There was the time when augmented reality, thinking about immersive experiences using the latest technology, those things are the kinds of things that a get privileged when you're using the newest technologies. But at the same time, those newer technologies may not be accessible to the broadest base of people, and so it does mean that we do have to deal with the conundrum that our professional praxis can actually be complicit in such a way that shuts

people out from actually doing the kind of work we need to do. And we have to bring that to attention. It's actually something that we brought to attention during the VMLK, we had a meeting at Hunt Library where we brought scholars across the nation to talk about VMLK and Digital Humanities more generally, and that was a strong force that we have to talk about professional development when it comes to DH because it privileges some people to do work and some people they can't.

Laurie Gries:

Right, absolutely. Well, tell us a little bit, if you don't mind, about one of the current projects you're working on that you consider to be taking up these tenants. You've already talked about Virtual MLK, but will you talk a little bit about the Global King project and how this might be just one kind of project of many that scholars interested in DVS might take up and then if you also have other ideas of what scholars might do, especially heeding the notion that we really need to privilege BIPOC-led projects. I would love to just you know hear about your own work and your own visions for what other kind of work DVS can be doing, so that readers can maybe pick up on some of those ideas even.

Keon Pettitway:

So the Global MLK project is one that tries to stitch the histories of African independence and the Civil Rights Movement. And the reason why I think that's so critical, is that we know much about what was happening during the 1950s and 60s, and let alone what a lot of scholars have talked about as the long history of the Civil Rights Movement that stretches, of course, all the way back to the 1800s and the 1920s. But even if we just stick with what we seem to know about the traditional sense or the traditional historical timeline of Civil Rights history starting around 1950s, at the same time, there started to emerge the independence of African nations from colonial powers. And when we talk about, even in, and I would say particularly in rhetorical histories, when scholars do work related to a number of events and a number of folk and people involved in Civil Rights history--may it be analyzing speeches or photographs or magazines--I may be totally wrong, and forgive me if that's the case, but I have less likely seen researchers talk about the interconnections with African independence in Civil Rights history.

Laurie Gries:

Absolutely.

Keon Pettiway:

I have yet to see that, and I'm thinking about a call for action that David Zareski once said in one of his articles, which was when we're doing work on what's next for doing work on public address, is thinking about the global aspects of public address, and so I take that and did take that as a charge to say "Yeah, why is it that when we talk about public address and particularly visual public address, we don't interface African independence with Civil Rights history?" So Global King attempts to utilize King's public address, particularly his speeches, as a way to understand how were publics impacted by what was going on in a number of African nations, especially Ghana? And then likewise, how was what was happening in the United States regarding Civil Rights history, how was that articulating what was happening with African independence? It's so interesting because there are a number of studies that talk about the number of folks who were involved in the Civil Rights Movement actually moved to Ghana during to help their independence. But in rhetorical histories, that legacy is lost upon us, and I would make a claim and say it's also been stolen from us because to talk about African history or talk about African studies in relation to the emergence of nations probably, perhaps, is not something that was not even attuned to or seen as important for the general public, and I mean for the general public, I mean to the American public. To the American publics to say what also-what we can say is we can see how what's happening over in a number of African nations, this has some global ramifications here, it's been stolen from us, right? We didn't see what was happening in Ghana on our television screens. We did see what was happening on television screens right here in the United States, which we needed that. But those histories of African independence – my take on the Global King project is try to recover that and understand how those two interacted with one another. That's the whole premise of the project, so that's one way that I'm starting with at the foundation is recovering humanity and particularly recovering humanity of African and Black folk globally to say your stories matter as well. Your histories matter. The regional dynamics of coloniality and post-coloniality matter. My project tries to surface that.

If I could speak to maybe one tenant that I try to use with the Global MLK project is I would say, it's also the tools that I'm using to bring to bear on how to do Digital Visual research and do Digital Visual history, rhetorical history, understanding that for me to do research and also to curate that research and bring that research to the masses, it has to have global dimensions. What I do here in North Carolina, what I do in Virginia, what I do in any other state or locale in the United States can't be the same thing I do if I go to Ghana. Right?

So, one of the things I'm working on with the Virtual MLK project is working with other colleagues on understanding well, if we know that the tools that I may be using may be a mutual host, how can we think about this from a postcolonial perspective? If I were to take this project and not only perhaps bring it to, say, Ghana, but also how do I invite Ghanaians and people who were involved and impacted by African independence? How can I bring their

thoughts to bear even not only on simply the content but even the tools that I'm using to collaborate with folks?

Laurie Gries:

Right, right. So what are those tools? What's your solution here?

Keon Pettiway:

So one of my solutions is to think about the different cultural communication practices that don't privilege one set of practices of how we experience rhetorical history. So, I would say that, perhaps, a primary mode, if you will, or modes, if you will, for experience in visual authority history may be digital means. It may be photographs. It may be television. Here, I'm thinking about *Eyes on the Prize* in relation to Civil Rights History. However, there are other cultural communication practices that are just as meaningful if you think about it from the locale of other publics. In Ghana, one of the significant forms of commemoration is actually portrait t-shirts. So, in the United States, we may have photographs like take, for instance, the Obama Hope craft, and we see it on posters. However, in many places, particularly in region and on the continent, a lot of African publics, and we saw this during African independence, that people were wearing portrait clothes or portrait t-shirts, and I think that in some ways may be a significant mode of transition or circulation that might be out of the purview for what we may do in the United States.

Laurie Gries:

Absolutely.

One of the things that you're making me think about that's so important too is how often, you know, do, you know, and I'm gonna say, we, as scholars, create research projects based on certain communities that may involve them in the research process but then end up presenting them in ways that those very communities can't even access right. And so, I'm thinking about your project and how it will be delivered. How...how will the knowledge, how will the research be delivered in certain ways, but then how are you taking into account how you want to create accessible opportunities for those very community members who participate in the research to be able to access that very research?

Keon Pettiway:

Yes, it's a good point, and I haven't figured out all of the strategies, but I do have the foundational framing or foundational framework or thinking around how to do that, and the foundation is that whatever I do, whatever I present, whatever I provide, should be elevating the communities, not only in terms of by means of making sure that their stories are privileged, but also how can we elevate the educational, the economic, conditions of the communities where we are. And I think that's just such a different take on doing our work, to say "not only did you work with us on the research, you might even have helped us co-write an article that got published in one of our steam journals or maybe...in the community's newspaper." That's one thing, but it's another thing to say at the core premise of what should happen at the end of this Digital Humanities project, that the foundation should be that it elevated the lives and the ways to flourish in those communities. I'm, me, I'm good. It's likely that I'm gonna be okay. I'll get any recognition from the academy. I probably would use some of our projects as a way to bolster my platform for tenure, if you will. For all intents and purposes, those things for professional development, for researchers, we're good. We may be covered in some, and in some ways, we're not. And so I think that to put in the forefront that really this is about elevating the communities who are trusting us with their stories, trusting us with their experiences, trusting us with their artifacts and their precious memories, that at the end of this, it shouldn't only be about what we've done for the academy, we should look back and say "now do you see how we have used this project as a way to expand, elevate, and promote a human flourishing in communities, may it be economic, social, educational, talking with them about what they need and how can we support it. That's a whole different means of what we do with our research.

Laurie Gries:

Yeah, I love that. In indigenous communities, a lot of scholars have talked about that in terms of relational accountability, and I'm glad you're reminding readers of that. I think that's something that I definitely haven't put enough thought into, and it's really making me think selfishly about my next book project and the research that does, is, going to include on the ground researching communities and so to read more carefully about how I can use my scholarship and I can give back while I'm there. Another added responsibility that too many of us don't think about, so thank you for sharing that.

Keon Pettiway:

And may I add that I think one way that we can do – because it's a large task, and I would say that it's important to note that there are people in the community who have already been doing their work but haven't had the success or the platform to really do what's needed. And

we may come in and people may listen to us just by way of our credentials. This was the case even with King, right, that there were other leaders who were fit to lead, but the fact that King had a certain repertoire, he had a certain base of education, they thought that people would listen to him a little bit more, even though there were other people who were in the community who were leading already. So, I think for us as researchers, one way that we can think about how to give back to communities in that such ways is to use our privilege, to use our power, as a way to elevate those needs. It may be, for instance, if I take Global King as a case, I would want to do as much as I can for the communities that I'm involved in who are impacted. But I know as one person in this point in time, I'm unable to make that considerable amount of impact just from one project, but what I can do, however, is maybe create the conditions where we can bring to the people to the table who can. And maybe that's something that we can do. Maybe we can't do the actual work, but we can create conditions, work with the community, so it can get done.

Laurie Gries:

Right, love that. As a way to close the conversation, I just want to thank you ahead of time again so much for being here, but what kinds of other projects, other Black Digital Humanities, or Black Digital Visual studies, projects can you imagine unfolding and that you would like to see done? Do you have any in mind?

Keon Pettitway:

Yeah, so I would say that I would love to see, maybe, so two things, and I'll give an example of one scholar who's doing that work. Maybe reimagining digital work that's already been done, and now I'm taking Black Digital Humanities as a way to say them, and similar to your project right, now, we already know this work has been done in this particular way, this particular framework or method for DH or DVS. Now let's take that same project and see what it tells us when we look at it from a Black DH perspective. Right, so that's kind of more backward looking, but if we look more forward looking, I would say that as projects go, and I can point to Derek Hamm who was one of our colleagues who worked on the VMLK project and he's a department head in the graphic design department--art and design department—at North Carolina State University. Dr. Hamm is working on a number of projects related to Civil Rights history. He's doing some amazing work, and what I would like to see, and I think what could be done, is when we are actually developing projects, curating projects, that we find ways to do it in such a way that allows even multiple generations to be involved. So, I'm talking about a project that would be interesting to a number of generations, even to school-aged children, and here I'll take King for instance. We know all too well that, of course, "I have a Dream" speech, I know it's still something that is taught in K through 12 schools. However, what students probably

typically get is the speech, the written speech, or they may see a video, but what they don't get, however, is something like Derek Hamm's "I am a man" VR experience that immerses people in such a way that is captivating. It's rich, it's innovative, it's new, and it finds a way for not only multiple generations to be involved, but it actually gets them excited about doing this work as well. So, that's what I would like to see, and I think it's a way that we could go both forward backward looking and forward looking.

Laurie Gries:

That's a great idea. Well, thank you so much. I just cannot tell you how much I've enjoyed this conversation and how much I've learned from you and so excited that you're part of this collection, and I look forward to seeing this Global King project unfold, and I look forward to many future conversations with you.

Keon Pettiway:

Likewise. Thank you so much for inviting me. I'm humbled again. Thank you for all the work that you're doing and that you have done and that you are doing. I'm appreciative, and I know others are, so I'm looking forward to continuing the conversation and seeing all the wonderful work you're gonna continue to do as well.

Laurie Gries:

Thank you so much.