Technology Transforming Preservation
Digital storytelling—as practice, methodology, and ethos—has been drawing increasing interest from a wide range of educational and cultural institutions. It was initially associated with Joe Lambert and the Center for Digital Storytelling, founded in the 1990s. But given the spread of broadband and the increased importance of digital media today, digital storytelling may now be synonymous with storytelling writ large. The center’s 2015 name change to simply “StoryCenter” reflects this development. However, the unique tools that digital technology offers for shaping narrative and experiencing authorship remain important to the tenets Lambert outlined in *Digital Storytelling: Capturing Lives, Creating Community*. One of the goals of digital storytelling, Lambert wrote, is to encourage every user, creator, and student to be “the author of your own life, of the way you move through the world.” Social media platforms are uniquely suited to achieving this goal—they expand the possibility of 21st-century digital storytelling. Either alone or in conjunction with the more traditional blogs and digital archives, social media can disrupt and construct inclusive narratives, highlight marginalized histories, and empower users.

**TWITTER: BEYOND HASHTAG ACTIVISM**

Like other forms of digital storytelling, social media offers user-creators opportunities to tell new kinds of stories, ones that express the many dimensions of everyday life. Although Facebook is often considered the progenitor of social media, Twitter has emerged as perhaps an even more effective tool for creating new narratives. Much has changed since its launch in 2006 as a social networking service that allowed users to post tweets limited to 140 characters, accessible via both text messaging and desktop devices. The platform currently allows users to share images, video,
and gifs (digital graphics formatted to permit animation), and the recent expansion from 140 to 280 characters per tweet suggests that still more innovation may be on the horizon.

As a global public platform—accessible to anyone with a cell phone—Twitter offers users across the political spectrum opportunities to raise awareness of pressing issues; turn the spotlight on social protest; and challenge the narratives presented by major media outlets, government officials, and law enforcement. Mark Anthony Neal, author and professor of black popular culture at Duke University writes that tweets about the Georgia Prison Strike, the Arab Spring, the #Occupy movement, and the execution of Troy Davis recall “the spirit of the Civil Rights Movement of the early 1960s and the role that technology played during that time.”

The most well-known such use of social media in recent years is by the Black Lives Matter movement, whose eponymous slogan was launched in a 2013 Facebook exchange between Alicia Garza, Opal Tometi, and Patrisse Cullors after George Zimmerman, charged in the shooting death of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin, was acquitted. With dozens more unpunished murders of black children in the years since Trayvon Martin’s, users of platforms like Twitter have played a central role in drawing attention to events as they occurred. As researchers Sarah Jackson and Brooke Foucault Welles note, “many populations have been systematically excluded from the public sphere by historically narrow definitions of citizenship,” but social media functions as a “counterpublic”—a space for exchanging political views and opinions that exist in opposition to the norms of its cultural environment, and that “provides an alternative structure for citizen voices and minority viewpoints as well as highlights stories and sources based on relevance and credibility.”

As a counterpublic, Twitter creates space for the kinds of radical and democratic activities outlined by Lambert in his description of the possibilities of digital storytelling. For example, Tara Conley described the use of black feminist hashtags as acts of self-affirmation and consciousness-raising that shape the lives of black women and girls. Deen Freelon, Charlton D. McIlwain, and Meredith Clark have written about the impact of using hashtags
like #BlackLivesMatter and #Ferguson. As these and other researchers demonstrate, social media allows users to be the authors of their own lives; responding directly to events that impact them and their communities; and curating those events as they happen, shaping the surrounding cultural narrative in profound ways.

**DIGITAL STORYTELLING AND THE SOCIAL MEDIA “BUILD”**

A rigid focus on hashtag activism may obscure other ways in which social media platforms serve as novel digital storytelling tools. Twitter offers users specific opportunities to engage in rich world-building through avatar development—including selecting profile pictures and cover photos, biographies, links, and locations—creating unique identities and content. These choices, which I describe as “social media builds,” bring different aspects of a Twitter account together, so that the account itself tells a story as much as the tweets do. In some ways, however, it is the limits placed on user-creators that generate unique opportunities for narration and self-narration.

Less a sonnet and more a haiku, personalization on Twitter has remained something of an alluring challenge. Users can only send short-form messages and do not have access to the development code that might allow them to manipulate profile pages as they might have done with earlier platforms like LiveJournal or MySpace.

One example of social media build as digital storytelling practice is the Twitter account for the Isabella Gibbons, who was once enslaved at the University of Virginia, would go on to become a teacher in New England.

PHOTO COURTESY OF BOSTON PUBLIC LIBRARY
President’s Commission on Slavery at the University of Virginia (@slaveryUVA). Kirt von Daacke, dean of history at the University of Virginia (UVA) and co-chair of the commission, runs the Twitter account with help from an array of graduate students. One tweet at a time, he posts material relating to the experience of enslaved and free black men and women at the institution. Von Daacke began the account in 2015 to bring widespread attention to UVA’s history of slavery, the focus of his own archival research. As the university’s ties to slavery continued to come under scrutiny, and in the wake of the August 2017 white nationalist rally and violence in nearby Charlottesville, @slaveryUVA’s tweets shifted toward bringing attention to the rally and its aftermath as well as the history of Confederate monuments on UVA’s campus. The @slaveryUVA account does more than document a frequently underrepresented history of the university: it challenges widely held beliefs about the university’s history of slavery by acting as an archive and chronicle of pasts that have been marginalized in mainstream narratives—at UVA and in broader U.S. history. It takes the power of storytelling further by offering a public history practice of sharing information; challenging normative points of view; responding to events as they unfold through improvisation and call-and-response, more akin to oral storytelling than to written history; and engaging the highly affective and difficult questions surrounding the history of bondage.

The account’s build includes its cover image: a close-up of one of the serpentine walls that winds through the university grounds—an engineering marvel and a literal barrier between the spaces that were once worked by enslaved labor and those now walked by faculty or students.
The cover and profile images both represent opportunities to juxtapose the university as a space of higher learning against the reality of bondage that made such a space possible. Although set against an image of red brick, the @slaveryUVA tweets break down the wall by exposing the forced labor—as well as the experiences of free black people—that were integral to creating this institution of higher learning.

While @slaveryUVA is powered by human beings—which is to say, flesh-and-blood people manually post every tweet—social media bots can also be used in digital storytelling—for example, W. Caleb McDaniel’s @Every3Minutes Twitter bot. In 1975 history of slavery researcher Herbert Gutman wrote, “If we assume that slave sales did not occur on Sundays and holidays and that such selling went on for ten hours on working days, a slave was sold on average every 3.6 minutes between 1820 and 1860.” Intrigued, Rice University professor McDaniel considered the possibilities of using Twitter’s short-form structure to express the ubiquity of the sale of enslaved people during that period. In 2014, McDaniel created a Twitter account and made it into a “bot” by writing a Python code to automate its output. Every three minutes, the account tweets a variation of the same idea: “In the antebellum United States, someone just bought a human being.” Like @slaveryUVA, @Every3Minutes tells a story of slavery within Twitter’s minimalistic format. The use of bot technology, however, has allowed McDaniel to establish a constant frequency to disrupt followers’ timelines regularly, at potentially importune moments. As McDaniel noted in a blog post on the subject, his intention had been to repeat the same phrase each time, but Twitter does not allow duplicate tweets. The code he wrote to ensure variation rotates through words like “person,” “enslaved person,” and “black person” as well as “child,” “grandparent,” and “friend.” Thus, McDaniel explains, Twitter’s rules “forced [him] to attend to ‘an enslaved person’ as someone bearing multiple relationships to other persons.” The steady, unceasing tweets combined with the variable texts center questions of narrative and underscore the objectification of enslaved persons.
TRADITIONAL BLOGS AND ARCHIVE PLATFORMS

Although social media offers unique spaces and technologies for digital storytelling, the reach of its platforms is limited and the content is usually ephemeral. Outside of hashtags, in order to engage deeply with the content of a social media account, users must follow it; and most stories will become buried beneath new updates, posts, and news items within 10 to 14 days. Another common concern, particularly poignant when discussing issues related to marginalized groups, is the growing levels of surveillance. The most populated platforms, Facebook and Twitter, have come under increased scrutiny, and the U.S. Department of Justice recently subpoenaed Facebook for information related to activists.

The public nature of social media also makes Twitter a difficult platform to use in classrooms, where students of different ages or experience levels may need a better understanding not only of the technology itself, but also of the ethics and risks of engaging in public political discourse. WordPress plugins like BuddyPress or CommentPress offer an alternative by creating opportunities to simulate the productive and improvisational space that social media provides in a smaller classroom setting.

Stand-alone and self-hosted blogs and archives continue to play an important role in digital storytelling: platforms like WordPress, Omeka, Tableau Public, and Scalar are popular across many organizations and projects. The Colored Conventions Project (CCP), for example, uses Dublin Core and Omeka to archive minutes from the 19th-century black convention movement. Beginning in the antebellum era, huge groups of free black people gathered in conventions to organize against slavery and for their human rights. These meetings occurred across the country and into the 1890s. CCP uses “exhibits”—long-form essays combined with references to and images of artifacts from its archives—to showcase the history of those meetings. New exhibits may be proposed from within the Colored Conventions cohort of faculty, archivists, librarians, and graduate students or by partner faculty and institutions. The rich exchange between CCP staff and faculty around the country has generated exhibits about the politics of food and housing, black women’s economic power, and key individuals such as Henry Highland Garnet.
STORYTELLING ACROSS DIGITAL MEDIA

Digital storytelling allows for the fusing of traditional blog spaces with social media platforms to create robust structures capable of supporting counterpublics. In 2015 scholars Amanda Figueroa and Ravon Ruffin founded the Brown Girls Museum Blog (#BGMB). They were interested in elevating the voices of marginalized and oppressed groups and highlighting those groups as worthy of study by museum professionals as well as in exploring the role of black and brown curators doing museum work. As a blog, #BGMB draws attention to events and happenings in the museum world, with a focus on narratives of African diasporic and Latinx life that are often left out of museum and gallery exhibits. But as a hashtag and in its accounts on Twitter and Instagram, #BGMB expands the conversation even further. The BGMB Instagram page is filled with high-resolution images from curated spaces around the world, screenshots of memes, portraits of museum and art world professionals, and images of Figueroa and Ruffin. It can, in and of itself, be construed as a museum, an exhibit, and a story of people of color in art and culture. Like @slaveryUVA, #BGMB also uses Instagram and Twitter to respond to recent events, from award shows to protests. Responsiveness, particularly in the context of digital media and its public audience, is imperative, and
user-creators like Figueroa and Ruffin make a critical political impact despite their economical use of characters. With hashtags like #BGMBFindYourSpace, Figueroa and Ruffin make clear that their goal is to help black and brown museum professionals, workers, and guests create and find their space.

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Digital storytelling is happening in a wider range of forms and across a broader range of platforms than teachers, researchers, and user-creators could have imagined just a few decades ago. Today the technology not only offers potential user-creators opportunities to shape their stories and share their work in different ways but it also challenges user-creators to rethink what the story form is and whom it serves. At the same time, the original call for a democratic format that allows creators at all stages of their lives and all levels of society to craft their own narratives is even more relevant now. Social media platforms’ contributions in this arena are seldom recognized, but they are creating some of the most innovative, daring, and radical space for this kind of work. FJ

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