Translatio Studii and the Poetics of the Digital Archive: Early American Literature, Caribbean Assemblages, and Freedom Dreams

Elizabeth Maddock Dillon*

1. Introduction: The Coloniality of Knowledge and American Literature

Translatio studii—literally, the “transfer” or “translation” of knowledge—speaks of Western imperial triumphalism, from the medieval origins of the term to its eighteenth-century association with the movement of the seat of culture from Greece and Rome, to Europe, and ultimately to America. Closely associated with translatio imperii—the celebration of an imperial movement of power from east to west—translatio studii resonates both with respect to the turn to the archive in US literary studies and with respect to the histories of colonialism and empire embedded in those archives. In short, the notion of a transfer of knowledge in the Americas is deeply enmeshed with a politics of empire. The intimate relation of the two—translatio studii and translatio imperii—makes visible what we might call the coloniality of knowledge, the extent to which forms of knowledge and power are deeply related to one another in American archives and in our uses of them. The large-scale remediation of archival materials into digital form that marks the latest turn

*Elizabeth Maddock Dillon is professor of English at Northeastern University. She is the author of New World Drama: The Performative Commons in the Atlantic World, 1649–1849 (Duke University Press, 2014) and co-editor, with Michael Drexler, of The Haitian Revolution and the Early United States: Histories, Textualities, Geographies (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).
in US literary scholarship must also—as I argue in what follows—be viewed in relation to both translation and imperial domination.

The assertion that power shapes the archive is not a new one: theorists of the archive, from Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault to Saidiya Hartman and Michel-Rolph Trouillot, have persuasively described how power informs the archive and the extent to which the archive itself manifests the entwined nature of knowledge and power. Yet, as Ann Laura Stoler points out, the knowledge/power nexus is forged both by way of the contents of archives (the decision as to whose lives and records are deemed worth preserving) and their form; an archive is not an “inert site of storage and conservation” but is rather a “site of knowledge production” where we can trace “the grids of intelligibility that produced . . . ‘evidential paradigms’ at a particular time, for a particular social contingent, in a particular way” (90–91). The coloniality of knowledge is lodged in this grid of intelligibility—in the ways of framing information that determine what constitutes facticity, what constitutes (and does not constitute) the human. The form of an archive—what comprises an item, how the coordinates or metadata of an item are defined such that the item can serve as a unit of knowledge—speak of and construct the “legitimating social coordinates of epistemologies” (95).

In the case of US literature’s turn to the archive, the issue of coloniality is particularly pressing, not simply because of the colonial origins of the US, but because of the ongoing nature of that history in the present. “Coloniality” (as opposed to “colonial”) names the way in which colonial forms of power and knowledge extend from the period of the European colonization of America into the global present. Following Sylvia Wynter, we may put an even more exact point on the nature of colonial power: colonial power works to implicitly or explicitly distinguish human life that is worth sustaining from “life unworthy of life”—a division used, in turn, to justify and enact the extraction of labor and resources from colonial sites for the purposes of capital accumulation (Scott and Wynter 180). Furthermore, the colonial modes of racialization and dehumanization that operate in the service of capitalism are not simply a thing of the past: as Lisa Lowe argues,

The operations that pronounce colonial divisions of humanity—settler seizure and native removal, slavery and racial dispossession, and racialized expropriations of many kinds—are imbricated processes, not sequential events; they are ongoing and continuous in our contemporary moment, not temporally distinct or as yet concluded. In this sense, the coloniality of world history is not a single brute event but, rather, one that governs and calibrates being and society in an ongoing way. (92)
In sum, while the colonial period may be stored away in the past, coloniality has the capacity to shape both how archives were created and how they are understood today. Moreover, given the coloniality of archives, the fantasy of recovering the past that infuses archival research may well give us pause.\(^3\)

The new availability of digital archival materials gives the coloniality of archives additional fuel and force, particularly when we imagine archives as sources from which to simply draw information. I invoke the term *translatio studii* to point to the very long history of empire that created and shaped early American archives, and to its resonance in our current digital scholarly moment. This newest *translatio*—of analog archival materials into digital form—enables unprecedented speed and access, yet that enhanced access is not innocent: remediated digital archives are not divorced from the structures of power, knowledge, and authority that inform analog archives or from new and different iterations of authorizing power that are masked as mere transfer into digital form. The forms of remediation that digitization enacts—the *translatio* that occurs across an array of relations—from source to analog archive, from analog to digital archive, from archival form to literary scholarship—each require our attention. In what follows, I argue that the *translatio* of digital archives holds both peril and promise for the creation of new knowledge in US literary studies. Digital archives can reproduce and even reinforce the coloniality of knowledge, but by engaging with the affordances of the digital for reconfiguring archival structures at the level of form, they also present an opportunity for engaging in “freedom dreams” of decolonization (to use Robin D. G. Kelley’s term) for pursuing the possibility of the decolonization of knowledge production.

### 2. The Early Caribbean and the Absent Archive

The scene of new knowledge I turn to in this essay is the early Caribbean—an archipelago of islands that stood at the center of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Atlantic world, and thus at the advent of modernity.\(^4\) The newness of the New World, what Aníbal Quijano and Immanuel Wallerstein have called its “Americanity,” inhered in the structures of racialized labor, the violent taking of the land and lives of indigenous peoples and the enslavement of Africans, and the creation of a global economy in which colonies supplied core states with commodities extracted from the soil of indigenous peoples and the labor of slaves.\(^5\) The plantations of the Caribbean were, as Sidney Mintz has argued, the first factories of the New World—sites where the plantation system was developed...
and refined, such that it became foundational with respect to Americanness and modernity. While the centrality of the Caribbean to the early Atlantic world may be evident, the means of accessing the archives of the early Caribbean is less so. The nationally inflected history of the US has, in effect, overwritten the centrality of the Caribbean to the history of colonialism in America; furthermore, the history of imperialism and neo-imperialism has had material effects on the very existence of early Caribbean archives in both their analog and digital forms.

The geography of the early Caribbean is one fractured by empire: the imperial regimes of England, Spain, the Netherlands, and France all asserted sovereignty over Caribbean islands (or portions of them) from 1492 forward. The resources of the Caribbean were extracted from its soil by forced labor and shipped to European cities, as were the written and material records of Caribbean life. Currently, one can find more archival material related to the early Caribbean in the repositories of Europe and the US than on Caribbean soil. The British Library, for instance, has longer runs of early Jamaican newspapers than does the National Library of Jamaica; the French colonial archive in Aix-en-Provence holds far more records than the National Library of Haiti. To conduct research in the National Library of Jamaica today requires the payment of a daily fee to plug in one’s laptop computer to cover electricity costs; the library simply does not have the resources to provide free access to electricity to its patrons. In contrast to the straitened budgets of the Jamaican library, Yale University, which houses important Caribbean collections, is now completing a $70 million, two-year renovation of its rare books library. This differential in resources derives from a deep historical connection: significant portions of the wealth that built and sustained Yale were derived from the Caribbean and Africa by way of the slave trade. For instance, the first endowed professorship at Yale College—the Livingstonian Professorship of Divinity—was the result of a 1745 gift from Colonel Philip Livingston, a leading US importer of slaves from Jamaica (Dugdale et al. 3–4). We do not need to look far to find the historical connections between the existing impoverishment of Caribbean cultural resources and the wealth of European and US ones. Further accelerating this inequality is the effect of differential resources on the creation of digitized collections. In the US and in Europe, archival materials related to dominant national histories are the most likely targets for early and large-scale digitization: the papers of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Franklin, for instance, are all the subject of major digitization projects. Those of enslaved and indigenous peoples in the Caribbean are not.
The contents of archives are also determined—in multiple ways—by the knowledge regimes of imperialism: the British Library, for instance, holds 40 copies of 15 different English-language editions of Bryan Edwards’s *The History, Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies* published between 1793 and 1848. Edwards was a proslavery plantation owner in Jamaica, and for more than a century, his text served as the authoritative history of Jamaica (Ragatz 165). Together with his account of the geography, climate, colonial history, and agricultural production of Jamaica, Edwards’s text includes a poem, attributed to his tutor, Isaac Teale, titled “The Sable Venus. An Ode,” a paean to white men’s pleasures in having sex with enslaved African women. The poem comprises 27 stanzas praising the “Sable queen of love,” as the sibling of the white Venus of classical tradition: “The loveliest limbs her form compose, / Such as her sister Venus chose, / In Florence, where she’s seen: / Both just alike, except the white, / No difference, no,—none at night, / The beauteous dames between” (*History* 30). As these lines indicate, the Sable Venus is, primarily, a figure of sexual allure available for delectation in the dark, that is, for unseen sexual alliances.

The poem, in effect, conjures an obscenely romanticized version of the Middle Passage in describing the story of the Sable Venus, who crosses the Atlantic from Africa to arrive on the shores of Jamaica. The central allegorical force of the Sable Venus—her embodied sexual allure and availability—is then distributed to the individual bodies of slave women for whom the speaker of the poem celebrates his own desire:

But when her step had touch’d the strand [of Jamaica],
Wild rapture seiz’d the ravish’d land,
From ev’ry part they came:
Each mountain, valley, plain, and grove
Haste eagerly to shew their love;—
Right welcome was the dame.
....

Do thou in gentle *Phibba* smile,
In artful *Benneba* beguile,
In wanton *Mimba* pout;
In sprightly *Cuba’s* eyes look gay,
Or grave in sober *Quasheba,*
I still shall find thee out. (*History* 31–32)

From the second edition forward, Edwards’s *History* included an engraving of the Sable Venus (Figure 1): the engraving depicts an African woman in transit to America arrayed as the goddess of love.
(Venus), poised contrapposto upon a half-shell and escorted across the ocean waves by cherubs, dolphins, and the gods Neptune and Triton. The “Voyage of the Sable Venus” engraving that appeared in Edwards’s *History* was produced by William Grainger after a painting by Thomas Stothard. “Sable Venus,” then, is the product of the imaginative labor of (at least) four European men: Teale, Edwards, Stothard, and Grainger. She is, in short, a gauzy collective fantasy that authorizes the rape of black women by white men—one that served to illustrate the most authoritative account of the history of Jamaica at least through the nineteenth century.
Edwards puts the bodies of enslaved women to work in his history in other ways as well. The fourth volume of the History offers a proslavery ethnography of Africans in Jamaica. Here Edwards describes the torture to death of two rebellious slaves, and suggests that death was not particularly painful to them, given the “courage, or unconcern, which the people of [Africa] manifest at the approach of death, [which] arises ... from their national manners, wars, and superstitions, which are all, in the highest degree, savage and sanguinary” (62). To bolster this claim, he relays the testimony of “Clara,” one of his “own Koromantyn Negroes,” who professes to prefer living in Jamaica to Africa because “people were not killed there as in Guiney, at the funeral of their masters.” Interestingly, the footnote concerning Clara also includes her account of the practice of inoculation against yaws in Africa, a practice that Edwards evidently views as appalling but that speaks to contemporary readers of the medical knowledge of slaves such as Clara. Given the structure of the book and the conventions of cataloging that attribute metadata to illustrations, the figure of the Sable Venus has a distinct prominence and the image has been widely purveyed: Clara, on the other hand, remains present only in a footnote. A search of the catalog of the British Library returns dozens of hits for Bryan Edwards, but none for Clara, nor can we access the stories of Phibba, Benneba, Mimba, Cuba, and Quasheba, beyond the European-authored fantasy of their availability for sex without consent or consequence.

3. The Presence of Absence in the Colonial Archive

The African women who appear and disappear in the archive of slavery suffer, as Hartman observes, “the same fate as every other Black Venus: no one remembered her name or recorded the things she said, or observed that she refused to say anything at all” (1–2). In the case of the Sable Venus, the archive “is a death sentence, a tomb, a display of the violated body, an inventory of property, a medical treatise on gonorrhea, a few lines about a whore’s like, an asterisk in the grand narrative history.” How, Hartman asks, does one rewrite this narrative “as a counter-history of the human, as the practice of freedom”? (3). Although there is no simple answer, the digitization of archives opens new forms of possibility for counter-narration and the creation of new modes of knowing that offer alternatives to the coloniality of archives. As Simon Gikandi points out, it is not a lack of material that constructs the crypt of the black Atlantic; rather, as Edwards’s text indicates, the form and episteme of existing archives enable certain kinds of knowledge and foreclose others. Gikandi notes that colonials in Jamaica kept meticulous
records in which slaves are everywhere present. These records were aimed at measuring and maximizing profit through the plantation system, for which the labor of slaves was indispensable. Moreover, colonial record-keeping sought to produce and naturalize slavery by way of its managerial logic:

Slave masters sought to assert their authority through relentless record keeping. . . . From Edward Long to Thomas Jefferson, slave masters turned to writing as a will to power; record keeping, and the archiving gesture, was a form of violent control; the archive was an attestation to the authority of natural history, the key to the ideology of white power. . . . And thus from logbooks and firsthand accounts of the slave trade to the major histories written by planters, the archive of the slavers established statements whose major role was to fix the African as an object, as chattel, as property, and indeed as the symbol of the barbarism that enabled white civilization and its modernist cravings. (92)

On the one hand, then, the archive of slavery is built, as Hartman writes, “upon a foundation violence”—one that seeks to eradicate the humanity of the enslaved in order to define slaves as property, as “bare labor” or “units of labor power” alone (10), without social being or subjectivity. Yet in so doing, the archive also narrates the presence of slaves and what Christina Sharpe describes as the “monstrous intimacies” that slavery countenanced and created between slaves and free whites. In this way, archives substantiate the creation of counter-memory and counter-knowledge. For instance, even while relegated to a footnote in Edwards’s text in which she ostensibly testifies to her own less than fully human status, Clara speaks instead of the opposite—of her superior medical knowledge of the prevention of disease through inoculation.

The absence of unmediated voices of the enslaved from the archive is itself part and parcel of the founding violence that Gikandi and Hartman track. Because slaves were denied access to literacy, they were also barred from access to the technology of the archive. The episteme of the archive, then, both denied slaves entry to the archive as the producers of self-authored texts and records and positioned them within the archive as nonsubjects. But the absence of authorial slave voices (as traditionally defined by literary and archival protocols) is belied by the necessary presence of the enslaved in the archive as the source and central producers of colonial wealth. The colonial archive is thus defined by a fundamental contradiction: given the silence enforced upon them, slaves are absent from the archive as producers of official knowledge, even as they are present in and central to the archive as producers of
economic value. The ineradicable presence of enslaved peoples in the archive—despite the systemic work of a colonial regime that aims at the social death of the enslaved—makes it possible to re-narrate the dehumanization enacted by coloniality and to create a counter archive.

The contradiction between the absence and presence of enslaved Africans in the archive of the Atlantic world is starkly visible in the pages of eighteenth-century Caribbean newspapers. On the one hand, newspapers such as the Jamaican Royal Gazette and the Kingston Weekly Advertiser detail the sale of slaves as commodities, and the pursuit, punishment, and torture of slaves as nonhuman “units of labor” alone, providing harrowing evidence of the efforts of a plantocratic regime to enforce social death upon slaves. On the other hand, the very advertisements that specify the nature and value of the “commodity” of the slave speak forcefully of the richly social and deeply human nature of enslaved individuals. Newspapers demonstrate that, instead of being absent from the social fabric of the Caribbean, slaves were manifestly present within and integral to that fabric. Consider, for instance, the following advertisement for a runaway slave that appeared in the Jamaican Mercury and Kingston Weekly Advertiser on 24 June 1780:

Absented himself from the subscriber, about three weeks ago a Negro Boy, named BRANDON, but generally called Brandy, to which name he readily answers. He is a slim, clean limbed lad, about 16 years of age, brought up in America, has a great deal of sanctity in his countenance and is capable of telling an artful tale; commonly expresses himself in the American drauling [sic] tone, but when on his guard, speaks English with some propriety; he was some time a waiting-boy to an officer of the guards at New-York, and by his own account has made a short campaign with a Hessian office up the North River, so that it is probable he may attempt to impose on some gentlemen of the army here, an information of which will be thankfully acknowledged with as a reward of FORTY SHILLINGS to any person who will bring him to his master, or lodge him in any place of security, giving advice thereof. The law will positively be strained to its greatest strength against any persons detected in concealing or attempting to carry him off the Island. JAMES DAVIS. 10

Rather than presenting a figure of bare labor, this advertisement provides an intriguing biography of a widely traveled 16-year-old enslaved boy who knows about soldiering and whose storytelling skills suggest he is capable of sophisticated discourse-shifting while
performing multiple voices and identities. While the “subscriber” promises that the law will be “positively strained to its greatest strength” to return Brandon to slavery, the advertisement itself strains against the logic that naturalizes slavery as a form of social death. In the language of the advertisement, Brandon appears as strategic, self-directed, intelligent, social, and free. As much as the advertisement aims to return Brandon to slavery, it manifests instead the expressive, deeply human singularity of a clean-limbed boy named Brandon.

Another runaway advertisement appearing in the same edition of the *Jamaican Mercury and Kingston Weekly Advertiser* is perhaps even more confounding of the colonial logic that seeks to link slavery to social death:

A Wife ELOPED!

Whereas ABBY, the wife of the subscriber, has absented herself these 18 days past from this house:—This is to request her to return home, and she shall be kindly received;—but if she is found anywhere, the person harbouring her may depend on being prosecuted. N.B. The Subscriber is a Free Negro, but his wife is a Slave, the property of Col. FANNING of New-York, who gave her to him during his life. TOBIA HARDY.11

The runaway in this case is both a wife and a slave: in her marron-age, she has slipped the chains of slavery and the knot of marriage at once. Although the description of Abby as an individual is not as richly detailed as that of Brandon, above, she nonetheless squarely occupies a site of impossibility: slaves were denied the right to the legal act of marriage in Jamaica—an act that would accord them official access to the resources of British colonial social reproduction. Abby, however, is both enslaved and married—she is at once socially present and socially absent. And significantly, neither the status of wife nor that of slave are ones that she wishes to remain tethered to.

4. Assemblage in the Archive

In the field of early American literature, a strong critical tradition, drawing on the work of Jürgen Habermas and Benedict Anderson, has defined the newspaper as a central site of the formation of the public sphere, in which the communicative rationality of the republican citizen is enabled and instantiated (Habermas, Warner) and in which the collectivity of a nation of reading subjects is imaginatively convoked (Anderson). Yet the pages of Caribbean
newspapers, crowded as they are with advertisements for runaways, suggest quite different possibilities: less the emergence of a refined voice of impersonal/republican reason than a chaotic scene of commerce, contradiction, and coercive force. It is striking, for instance, that the many runaway advertisements in Jamaican newspapers are not solely for runaway slaves, but for other people who have escaped from the positions to which they are legally assigned. Together with such advertisements we find notices for runaway indentured servants, runaway sailors, runaway soldiers, runaway wives, and even runaway livestock. The vast numbers of these advertisements, and their variety, indicate that many people (and animals) are “lost, stolen, or strayed” in Jamaica, seeking to escape from the place to which colonial society has sought to consign them. One might say, then, that colonial newspapers express a coercive fantasy of order—of putting people in their place—in a world of many bodies moving in contrary directions. Furthermore, it is hard not to see that the newspaper itself is financially sustained by those subscribers seeking to enforce plantocratic order: in short, the public sphere of the newspaper is balanced on the back of the slave economy in the Caribbean.¹²

Given the insistent contradictions of absence and presence at play in early Caribbean newspapers, and in the archive more broadly, I suggest that we should turn from a concept of the reasoned public sphere and toward a principle such as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s notion of assemblage for a model of how to approach the coloniality of the archive.¹³ The newspaper is, literally, an assemblage of items: advertisements for runaways sit next to reports on the proceedings of the Jamaica Parliament, letters concerning the price of sugar, and advertisements for performances of Shakespeare’s plays. Bruno Latour’s use of assemblage includes a useful account of reassembling the social as well—one that emphasizes the force of “actants” (objects or subjects) embedded in networks and relays of social meaning over the rationality or agency of speaking subjects. Extending Latour’s account to both subjects and objects offers a new view of the social space in the early Caribbean: we can see the shape of a world in which sugar has as much social force as, say, Lady Maria Nugent; a runaway wife might assemble the force of a slave and that of a spouse as an actant within multiple social relays; a slave might exert social presence not by way of being designated “human” or “civil” but by way of being embedded in a set of economic and social relations among whites, blacks, and commodities. As assembled texts, newspapers lend themselves well to this model of reading, opening up relations across and among those people and things appearing in their pages.¹⁴
Acts of juxtaposition, decontextualization, and recontextualization—what we can call remix and reassembly—allow the archive to tell a different story from the one that colonial knowledge regimes reproduce.15 Deforming the archive also enables creative revisions of the metadata used to access the archive, thereby changing what counts and is available as knowledge. Newspapers are a particularly self-evident example of how remix and assemblage might function, but this model obtains as well for other texts, such as books and records. In literary terms, the return to the archive with scissors has been perhaps most brilliantly engaged by M. NourbeSe Philip in her work Zong!—a book-length poem that cites and remixes the language of a court case concerning the infamous 1781 massacre on the slave ship Zong during which 133 slaves were thrown overboard and drowned for the purposes of gaining insurance payments for their deaths.

Specifically, Philip uses the language of the 1783 court case concerning the massacre as a “word store” for her poem. As she describes her process of writing the poem, she speaks of her aims in disassembling and reassembling the words of the court case: “I mutilate the text as the fabric of African life and the lives of these men, women, and children were mutilated—I murder the text, literally cut it into pieces, castrating verbs, suffocating adjectives, murdering nouns, throwing articles, prepositions, conjunction overboard, jettisoning adverbs.” In separating the words—cutting sentences and even words into pieces—Philip also recomposes them so that new relations among words speak of different stories: the direct object of a sentence, for instance, becomes the subject; or with the erasure of a verb, relations of causality are placed in question. In her acts of mutilation and reordering, Philip states, she “reads the untold story that tells itself by not telling” (193–94). As Philip suggests in this very active scene of reading as deformation, the archive becomes a site for the poetic construction of relations that the archive did not aim to produce or authorize.

In a related vein, the title poem of Robin Coste Lewis’s National Book Award–winning collection Voyage of the Sable Venus: And Other Poems (2015) turns specifically to the figure of the Sable Venus in the archive. The poem is “comprised solely and entirely of the titles, catalog entries, or exhibit descriptions of Western art objects in which a black female figure is present” (35). Lewis’s searing poem of “found” titles places the coloniality of the archive on display and questions it by means of recontextualization: her intent in the poem, she writes, “was to explore and record not only the history of human thought, but also how normative and complicit artists, curators, and art institutions have been in participating in—if not creating—this history” (35). Lewis’s work of assemblage
extracts the Sable Venus from a text such as Edwards’s History, where her figure was used to naturalize empire and white male access to enslaved black women, and instead uses this figure to narrate the profound complicity of museums, libraries, and archivists in creating and sustaining knowledge practices of racial and sexual domination.

With respect to scholarship in the digital archive, the work of poiesis (making, “bringing-forth,” in Heidegger’s terms) in which Philip and Lewis engage is particularly instructive. In the field of media archaeology, scholars have made the case that the digital archive is not simply a site of more capacious or more accessible storage. Instead, the translatio from analog to digital involves a fundamental shift in the way meaning is created through the archive. Lev Manovich and Wolfgang Ernst contend that the narrative mode of understanding that characterizes the analog archive—an archive built largely in words—shifts in digital media to a different model: for Manovich, this model is the database, and Ernst, in turn, emphasizes the algorithmic or computational nature of the digital archive—an archive built in bits. The shift from narrative to algorithmic ontologies foregrounds the fundamentally combinatorial nature of meaning itself: we make meaning by placing words or bits in relation to one another. In the digital archive, these relations are more subject to disassembly and reassembly than in the analog archive because of the mechanism of the media itself. For Ernst, “algorithmic objects are objects that always come into being anew and processually; they do not exist as fixed data blocks” (89). Narratives embedded in the analog archive, then, must be reconstructed in the digital archive in order to be accessed as narratives; materials in the digital archive thus invite us (perhaps even force us) to attend to the construction and deconstruction of historical narratives.

In a related vein, critics including Kari Kraus and Ian Bogost have stressed the need for “reflective design” in digital humanities and described how an emphasis on design enables a denaturalizing of existing modes of knowledge production and consumption. Kraus and her collaborators describe “reflective design” as a process that makes familiar objects in the world—like books—strange and alien: reflective design “helps us discover fault lines in the objects, artifacts, or systems being explored . . . and in doing so allows us to imagine them otherwise: to see them as alterable rather than immutable; as possibility spaces rather than as rigid, inherited structures” (Hancock et al. 76). The notion of experimental or reflective design opens the way to creative engagement with the very form of knowledge production. I would suggest, then, that design innovation—and an attention to poiesis or making rather than simply
representing—must be central to digital humanities work that engages in anticolonial archive practices.

What might such an anticolonial scholarly poiesis look like in practice? A number of digital projects that treat early Caribbean materials exemplify what I propose here, including “Slave Revolt in Jamaica, 1760–61,” Vincent Brown’s digital mapping project; “Just Teach One: Early African American Print,” a literary research and pedagogy project convened by Nicole Aljoe, Lois Brown, John Ernest, Gabrielle Foreman, Eric Gardner, and Jocelyn Moody and hosted by the American Antiquarian Society; and the Early Caribbean Digital Archive, an archival “co-laboratory” hosted at Northeastern University that Aljoe and I codirect. Each of these digital projects has different aims and uses different methodologies. Brown’s mapping project draws on textual accounts of “Tacky’s Rebellion” in Jamaica and charts the strategic movements of troops of maroon slaves across the island of Jamaica in a series of battles that unfolded over two years. Juxtaposing passages of colonial texts—many of which display contempt for the rebel slaves—with maps of the strategic movement of the slave troops across the island, Brown’s project places plantocratic views of the subhuman nature of African slaves in the same frame with maneuvers that bespeak the military acumen and will-to-freedom of the maroons and rebels, casting the coloniality of the archive in a new light.

The “Just Teach One: Early African American Print” project is loosely modeled on Duncan Faherty and Ed White’s “Just Teach One Project,” which has created digital teaching editions of out-of-print early American texts for scholars to use in the classroom, together with teaching materials and a forum for reflection. The JTO Early African American Print project produced their initial digital edition in 2014 of the anonymously authored “Theresa: A Haitian Tale,” which first appeared in serial form in the African-American newspaper Freedom’s Journal in 1828, an edition of which Frances Smith Foster published in the African American Review in 2006, bringing the text into wide circulation among scholars. The short story tells the tale of the heroic Theresa, who aids in saving the life of Toussaint L’Ouverture and in procuring the success of the slave revolt that founded the Haitian Republic.

The JTO edition furthers Foster’s important editorial work in significant ways—ways that make use of the affordances of digital media to recontextualize the narrative and give it new meaning. First appearing in serial form in a newspaper, without an author’s name attached to it (only the initial “S” indicated authorship), “Theresa—A Haitian Tale” effectively had no metadata attached to it that would allow it to appear as an item in any catalog or search index. In Foster’s edition, the narrative was stitched together to
appear in a single place—a scholarly journal—but did not have the status either of a stand-alone text or of an item (with metadata) in a collection. The JTO edition recontextualizes (reassembles and remixes) the narrative once more, formulating it as a single text with metadata attached, and as a single text that stands as an item in a collection of early African-American literary texts available for classroom use. Placing a story about a black heroine’s role in the Haitian Revolution in a line of early African-American literary texts is significant, as the comments on the JTO webpage by scholars who have taught the text indicate: the text both places the Caribbean within the ambit of early American literary studies, and introduces a black heroine into the canon of nineteenth-century American literary texts.17

The Early Caribbean Digital Archive, in turn, aims not simply to aggregate early Caribbean materials, but to revise the metadata that we use to access and make sense of these materials. As Aljoe has argued, Caribbean slave narratives seldom appear as single-authored texts in the fashion of, say, Frederick Douglass’s Narrative. Slave narratives nonetheless exist in early Caribbean texts and are found embedded within religious, legal, and travel narratives authored by Europeans and white colonials (Creole Testimonies). The particular ease with which the digital medium can disassemble and reassemble texts—the “processual” nature of algorithmically compiled artifacts of which Ernst speaks—lends itself to locating and recontextualizing embedded slave narratives, like the narrative of Clara, to cite one example, that appears as a footnote in Edwards’s History. In structuring the Early Caribbean Digital Archive to make Clara’s narrative visible as an item, we have particularly attended to matters of form: for instance, in the XML schema we have created to encode the texts, we have created new tags to identify embedded slave narratives as well as anonymous individuals within texts. Our “anonymous person” tag is intended to give identifying metadata markers to the many enslaved people mentioned in texts with either a surname or no name. By giving every individual in the text a marker of identity, the unnamed slave now counts in a way that he or she previously did not.

After identifying an embedded slave narrative, such as Clara’s, we create a separate item in the archive with its own metadata. No longer embedded within a text under the name of Bryan Edwards (albeit necessarily linked to it with identifying information), Clara’s narrative stands both alone and in relation to the new context of other embedded slave narratives that form a collection of texts. In this sense, we are undoing the stitches that bind the codex and disturbing the pride of place accorded to the author’s name on the spine of the book. We are, manifestly, deforming the book, as well as
engaging in a form of scholarly *poiesis* that aims to bring forth new knowledge. Indeed, every decision on how to remediate analog material in digital form is a deformation and a remaking—not a seamless translation, but a set of decisions as to what constitutes knowledge, how meaning is located in the archive, and what “handles” the metadata will give us to sort and analyze that information.

If the *form* of the archive sustains the coloniality of knowledge, then the *translatio* of digital remediation offers the possibility of new formations. Remix and assemblage are fundamental conditions of digital data and of cultural analysis, and the assembled and collage-like nature of eighteenth-century newspapers as well as archives more broadly are particularly susceptible to such forms of translation in the name of new knowledge production. An emphasis on *poiesis* as it occurs in the archive is not an abrogation of responsibility to archival accuracy and truth-making, but an engagement with it, and a deeply humanities-oriented one at that. Just as the creators and curators of the ECDA, JTO Early African American Print, and “Slave Revolt in Jamaica, 1760–1761,” make choices about how to represent and encode information, so too do the British Library, Yale’s Beinecke Library, WorldCat, the Library of Congress, and the Oxford English Dictionary. Given that we live in a world where the formal aspects of technology increasingly shape what counts as knowledge—what is speakable and unspeakable or what is visible and invisible in the search algorithms that we now use to sort through the flood of information to which we have access—we need all the more modes of humanities analysis that ask what acts of making are at stake in digital “translations.” What structures form the embedded relays between *translatio studii* and *translatio imperii*, and how might we creatively break and remake them in the name of freedom dreams?

**Notes**

1. For a useful account of the relation of *translatio studii* and *translatio imperii* in early American writing, see Leonard Tennenhouse, *The Importance of Feeling English: American Literature and the British Diaspora, 1750–1850* (2009), 13–18.


3. As Lowe warns, “In privileging recovery one risks reproducing the very forms of violent erasure that are the signature of the regime of liberal freedom” (98).

4. On the Caribbean as the center of modernity, see Sibylle Fischer, *Modernity Disavowed: Haiti and the Cultures of Slavery in the Age of Revolution* (2004); C. L.
5. More specifically, Quijano and Wallerstein define Americanity in terms of coloniality, racism, and ethnicity—concepts that enabled the foundation of the capitalist world system: “The creation of this geosocial entity, the Americas, was the constitutive act of the modern world-system. The Americas were not incorporated into an already existing capitalist world-economy. There could not have been a capitalist world-economy without the Americas. . . . Americanity has always been, and remains to this day, an essential element in what we mean by ‘modernity’” (549).


7. The poem first appeared as a stand-alone publication under Teale’s authorship and was one of the earliest publications of the Jamaican press: The Sable Venus. An Ode. Inscribed to Bryan Edwards, Esq. (Kingston: Bennett and Woolhead, 1765). Edwards published a slightly redacted version of the poem in his 1792 volume Poems, Written Chiefly in the West Indies (Kingston, Jamaica: Alexander Aikman), and a further redacted version of the poem in the 1793 History.


10. 24 June 1780.


13. I draw here on both Deleuze and Guattari’s account of assemblage in A Thousand Plateau’s and Bruno Latour’s “Actor Network Theory,” an account of which appears in Reassembling the Social.

14. Recent critical work on readers’ scrapbook practices of reassembling the news, or, in Ellen Gruber Garvey’s evocative phrase, “writing with scissors,” in Writing
with Scissors: American Scrapbooks from the Civil War to the Harlem Renaissance (2013), and on the editorial clipping and reprinting of periodical pieces suggest that this mode of engagement with the newspaper obtained at sites of production as well as reception. See also Ryan Cordell’s discussion of the “network author,” in “Reprinting, Circulation, and the Network Author in Antebellum Newspapers,” American Literary History 27.3 (2015): 417–45.


17. There is much more to be said about both the JTO Early African American Print project as well as the “Slave Revolt in Jamaica, 1760–1761,” project. It is significant, for instance, that the JTO Early African American Print project provides multiple formats of the texts it publishes, including an XML format that enables readers/users to download an encoded version of the text to engage in their own forms of digital analysis and reassembly. For further discussion of the “Slave Revolt in Jamaica, 1760–1761,” project, see the essays collected in “Roundtable—Cartographies of the Archive: Mapping and the Digital Humanities” (Social Text 125 [Dec. 2015]) by Brown, 134–41; Dillon, “By Design Remapping the Colonial Archive,” Social Text 33.4 125 (2015): 142–47; and Claudio Saunt, “Mapping Space, Power, and Social Life,” Social Text 33.4 125 (2015): 147–51. Significantly, both the JTO Early African American Print project and the “Slave Revolt in Jamaica, 1760–1761,” project are open access.

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