

The Black Literature Network

White Paper for *The Black Literature Network*:  
*Building Knowledge through a Digital Media Datasphere*

Mellon Foundation Public Knowledge Grant

March 2025

Authors: Kenton Rambsy, Howard Rambsy II, Drew Davidson, Ayesha Hardison, Maryemma Graham, Sarah Arbuthnot Lendt

## Project Summary

The Black Literature Network (BLN) is a new initiative designed to advance African American literary studies through digital humanities methodologies. This is accomplished by enhancing access to Black literature by leveraging metadata, computational tools, and public-facing scholarship. The project features five primary portals on a public website <https://www.blacklitnetwork.org/>:

- Novels <https://www.blacklitnetwork.org/novels>: the Novel Generator Machine recommends Black fiction through metadata analysis;
- Archives <https://www.blacklitnetwork.org/archives>: the **Current Archives Collections Index (CACI)** collates basic information on Black-themed archive collections as a starting point for researchers;
- Podcasts <https://www.blacklitnetwork.org/podcasts>: the **Podcast Series Remarkable Receptions** provides accessible discussions on key texts and authors;
- Data Vis <https://www.blacklitnetwork.org/datavis>: the **Literary Data Gallery** presents data visualizations that highlight trends in African American literary history;
- Briefs <https://www.blacklitnetwork.org/briefs>: the **Multi-Threaded Literary Briefs** offer concise literary insights.

By integrating digital tools with literary research, BLN fosters discovery, deepens scholarly engagement, and broadens public understanding of Black literature.

BLN also includes the Data Rangers Fellowship Program, an opportunity for undergraduate and graduate students to learn more about digital humanities in the context of African American literary studies.

BLN is a joint project from the History of Black Writing, the University of Kansas (KU), the Interdisciplinary Research and Informatics Scholarship (IRIS) Center at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, the Black Data Lab at Howard University, and the Institute for Information Sciences at KU. The project is funded by a generous grant from the Public Knowledge division of the Mellon Foundation. The Archives section of the website (<https://www.blacklitnetwork.org/archives>) is also supported by a Digital Humanities Advancement Grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

### Primary Collaborators:

Howard Ramsby II, Professor of Literature, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, PI

Kenton Rambsy, Associate Professor of African American Literature, Howard University, Co-PI

Drew Davidson, Associate Professor of Computer Science, University of Kansas, Co-PI

Ayesha Hardison, Associate Professor of English and Susan D. Gubar Chair, University of Indiana Bloomington, Co-PI

Maryemma Graham, University Distinguished Professor of English Emeritus, University of Kansas, PI Emeritus

### **Project Origins and Goals**

Howard Rambsy II conceived the idea for what would become the Black Literature Network (BLN) after years of receiving book recommendation requests from students, colleagues, and members of the broader community. As an English professor specializing in African American literature, he regularly encountered people who were interested in Black fiction but struggled to identify where to start. These conversations took place in classrooms, barbershops, and public events, highlighting a persistent challenge—while Black literature was widely studied and celebrated in academic circles, there was no centralized, easily accessible resource for guiding readers toward relevant novels based on their interests. Rambsy recognized that this gap in literary access could be addressed through a systematic, data-driven approach, leading him to conceptualize a metadata-powered recommendation tool.

The events of the summer of 2020 further reinforced the need for such a resource. In response to the racial justice movement following the murder of George Floyd, there was a sharp increase in interest in Black-authored books. However, most of the attention was directed toward sociological texts, historical analyses, and memoirs, while Black fiction remained largely overlooked. This pattern revealed a deeper issue—not only was there a lack of public knowledge about the breadth of Black fiction, but there was also no structured system for introducing readers to these novels in meaningful ways. Recognizing this, Rambsy began exploring how metadata could bridge this gap, providing a scalable and adaptable method for connecting readers to Black literary traditions.

The History of Black Writing (HBW) was a logical partner for this endeavor. Founded in 1983, HBW was established with the belief that what was being read and taught represented a small percentage of a larger tradition of Black writing and that technology could provide more insight and access. After more than four decades of work, HBW now boasts a novel corpus nearing 7,000 titles (encompassing publication dates 1853-2023)

and a wealth of experience facilitating public programs and outreach, as well as administering projects.

Rather than simply creating a reading list, BLN sought to establish an interactive and multi-layered gateway to Black fiction that utilizes digital tools to facilitate discovery. The project was built on the idea that recommendations alone were insufficient—readers needed contextual support, historical framing, and multiple modes of engagement. Thus, the concept expanded beyond a single novel recommendation generator to include multiple pathways for literary access. The integration of metadata, audio discussions, structured literary briefs, data visualizations, and archival collections made BLN a pioneering approach to enhancing public engagement with African American literature. This multi-portal structure ensured that users, whether casual readers, students, or scholars, could engage with Black fiction and culture in ways that suited their needs and learning preferences.

BLN's approach aligns with broader trends in Black Digital Humanities, particularly in relation to Kim Gallon's concept of "recovery." Gallon asserts that digital tools can help recover, preserve, and promote Black cultural expression that has historically been overlooked<sup>1</sup>. BLN applies this principle by using metadata to amplify access to Black fiction to ensure novels that may not receive mainstream attention become discoverable through structured recommendations. By developing a system that integrates data, analysis, and storytelling, BLN serves as both a research tool and a public-facing platform that makes African American literary history more accessible, interactive, and enduring.

### **Project Activities, Team, and Participants**

BLN was developed through the expertise of scholars, digital humanities researchers, and technical specialists. PI Howard Rambsy II led the project's vision and implementation, ensuring that BLN remained rooted in African American literary studies while engaging broader audiences. Rambsy created the Podcast Series and Briefs. He also directed a cohort of Data Rangers.

Co-PI Kenton Rambsy applied computational methods and literary analysis to structure datasets and oversaw the Literary Data Gallery. He also directed cohorts of Data Rangers.

---

<sup>1</sup> Gallon, K. (2016). Making a case for the Black digital humanities. *Debates in the Digital Humanities*, 42-49. <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/46383>

PI Emeritus and History of Black Writing (HBW) founding Director Maryemma Graham contributed her expertise in archival research, integrating BLN with the Current Archives and Collections Index (CACI) to connect users with Black-themed archival collections. She, and later succeeding HBW director Ayesha Hardison, also led a team of student researchers at the University of Kansas in identifying and digitizing fiction titles, as well as refining HBW's metadata schema and collecting bibliographic metadata. (See Appendix for a full list of student researchers.) Maryemma Graham was instrumental, too, in securing funding from the Mellon Foundation.

Co-PI Drew Davidson led the website's technical development, with his research assistants constructing and coding the site. Davidson's team also worked on a prototype Annotation Tool. (See Appendix for a full list of student researchers.)

Margaret Smith, a professor of Digital Humanities at the IRIS Center at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, produced the initial prototypes for four BLN portals, providing the foundation for the project's digital design.

Elizabeth Cali, a professor of English at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, was a vital collaborator, particularly in the development and production of the Podcast Series. Her contributions helped expand the series into a dynamic platform with over 200 episodes, allowing the project to reach broad audiences beyond academic circles.

Hannah Park, a professor of Design at the University of Kansas, coordinated and conducted focus groups and user testing for the website design, ensuring that BLN's digital tools were intuitive and effective for scholars, students, and general readers alike.

The Data Rangers represent a key innovation of BLN, establishing a collective of student researchers trained in data-driven literary analysis. The Data Ranger cohorts were formed to cultivate emerging scholars in the field of Black Digital Humanities while contributing directly to the project's research initiatives. Their work involved structuring datasets, analyzing publication trends, and developing visualizations that provided new insights into African American literature. By engaging students in hands-on research, the Data Rangers model ensures that digital humanities methodologies are both applied in current scholarship and passed down to future generations of researchers to sustain BLN's mission beyond the life of the grant. (See Appendix for a full list of Data Rangers.)

Erin Wolfe, Metadata Librarian at the University of Kansas, worked with Ayesha Hardison and Maryemma Graham to consolidate HBW's previous metadata schemas designed for single, one-off programs into one that is comprehensive, practical, and meets the needs of users in anticipation of larger, sustained programs and more expansive research. Wolfe also created a manual to ensure consistent metadata creation and entry.

A network of twenty-five African American Literature scholars were tapped to contribute podcast scripts and write Multithreaded Literary Briefs (See Appendix for full list of contributors).

Podcast voiceover actors, video editors, illustrators, artists, and data visualization creators were all hired for individual projects via the Fiverr.com freelance site.

Sarah Arbuthnot Lendt, HBW's Research Project Manager, provided project management expertise and was responsible for contributor payments, project reporting, and liaising with accountants and administrators at the partner institutions.

## **Project Outcomes**

A major achievement of BLN was the completion of a functional implementation of the website <https://blacklitnetwork.org/>. The site meets our goals for delivering the Novel Generator Machine, Podcasts, Data Vis, Briefs, and CACI.

Another significant accomplishment of the BLN has been the development of metadata collection strategies to enhance literary discovery. Howard Ramsby II, Kenton Ramsby, and their respective student teams of Data Rangers successfully encoded and structured metadata for over 1,500 novels, creating one of the most comprehensive datasets for Black fiction. The Novel Generator Machine utilizes this metadata to generate personalized book recommendations based on themes, literary styles, and historical context, significantly improving accessibility to Black literary works (<https://www.blacklitnetwork.org/novels>). This structured approach has transformed how scholars, students, and general readers engage with African American literature, ensuring that important but lesser-known works are discoverable in meaningful ways.

The Podcast Series emerged as one of the most productive components of BLN, exceeding expectations with over 200 episodes under the direction of Howard Ramsby II and with contributions from Elizabeth Cali and more than two dozen other literary scholars (<https://www.blacklitnetwork.org/podcasts>). This series provides expert-driven discussions on key texts and authors, Black literary history, film, and comic books, offering valuable insights for educators, students, and general audiences. By making Black literary scholarship publicly accessible and engaging, the podcast extends conversations about African American literature beyond traditional academic spaces. Its presence across multiple digital platforms ensures that BLN's reach is broad and that discussions on Black fiction continue to thrive.

The Literary Data Gallery played a crucial role in expanding BLN's objectives by assembling and visualizing multipurpose datasets. Under the leadership of Kenton Rambsy and the Data Rangers, BLN developed structured datasets that offer new ways to examine Black literary studies. These include the Anthology Dataset, which tracks the representation of Black writers across major anthologies; the Dialogue in Black Women's Fiction Dataset, which explores patterns in character speech and interactions; and the Edward P. Jones Dataset, which maps dialogue and movement within the author's short story collections. These datasets provide essential tools for future literary analysis, digital humanities research, and computational approaches to Black fiction. The datasets informed the creation of 50 data visualizations on a wide range of topics, including African American novels, short stories, various authors, literary history, film, and comic books <https://www.blacklitnetwork.org/datavis>.

Ayesha Hardison's work with CACI is another major outcome of the project. As director of the History of Black Writing (HBW), she worked to expand BLN's reach by connecting it with archival materials and special collections related to 800 Black writers and cultural figures (<https://www.blacklitnetwork.org/archives>). Her work with CACI catalogs Black-themed archive collections at universities, libraries, and institutions, bridging BLN's digital resources with physical archival holdings. By integrating metadata-driven discovery with archival scholarship, BLN ensures that users have access to both primary and secondary materials that contextualize Black literary production, reinforcing the project's commitment to broadening the scope of African American literary research.

Additional products and outcomes include:

- Multithreaded Literary Briefs <https://www.blacklitnetwork.org/briefs> – 43 standard entries and 29 whiteboard animations about African American literary and cultural history were created. We sought to produce Briefs that connected to other topics, allowing for users to find information linked by various threads.
- Annotation Tool prototype based on [hypothes.is](https://hypothes.is)
- Conference – The Futures of Black Digital Humanities Conference took place in Washington, DC in late 2024. Dana Williams' (Howard U) 9/19 public keynote at the Smithsonian Museum of African American History and Culture was "sold out" with all 330 free tickets requested. Sixty-three invited scholars attended the 9/20 closed conference with keynotes from Allie Martin (Dartmouth College) and Marisa Parham (U of Maryland) as well as a Graduate Student Lightning Panel
- HBW Novel Corpus – utilized the newly consolidated metadata schema to collect bibliographic data on nearly 5,000 titles

## **Project Evaluation and Impact**

The project has been evaluated based on user engagement, including three rounds of focus groups and three micro-conferences to gauge the effectiveness of specific portals; feedback from scholars; and the functionality of digital tools. Additionally, the efforts by Brand Builders Promotions utilizing HBW's existing social media accounts generated a combined 30k+ organic views across Instagram and Facebook promoting the site and increased domain authority and keyword indexing.

## **Project Continuation and Long-Term Impact**

The Black Literature Network will expand beyond its current focus on novels to encompass a broader range of Black literary genres, including poetry, short stories, autobiographies, and comics. This expansion will require refining metadata structures to accommodate diverse forms of literature while maintaining the project's commitment to accessibility and discovery. The Podcast Series will continue to grow, bringing in new voices and perspectives to further contextualize Black literary traditions. The Literary Data Gallery will incorporate new datasets and visualization techniques to support deeper interaction with Black literary history. Our work on CACI taught us that Black archival collections need support to catalog and, thus, index. We need to build strong, interpersonal relationships with Black archival collections to determine the best ways to feature – and amplify – their holdings. Additionally, more visual aesthetics on the website will help promote and capture the richness and utility of Black archival collections. Through strategic partnerships and continued development, BLN aims to establish itself as a premier resource for digital literary scholarship and broad public engagement with African American literature.

## **Appendix**

### **Podcast and/or Multithreaded Literary Brief Contributors:**

- Shanna Benjamin, Wake Forest University
- Elizabeth Cali, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville
- Jennifer Colatosti, Perimeter College – Georgia State University
- Nicole Dixon, Northwestern University
- Angel Dye, Rutgers University
- John Gruesser, Kean University and Sam Houston State University
- Aneeka Ayanna Henderson, Amherst College
- Alisha Knight, Johns Hopkins University
- Cameron Leader-Picone, Kansas State University
- Ebony Lumumba, Jackson State University
- C. Liegh McInnis, Jackson State University
- Stephyn Phillips, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville
- Donovan Ramon, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville
- Howard Rambsy, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville
- Joseph Ramsey, University of Massachusetts Boston
- Cindy Reed, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville
- Kathy Lou Schultz, University of Memphis
- Richard Schur, Drury University
- Christel Temple, University of Pittsburgh
- Courtney Thorsson, University of Oregon
- Emily VanDette, SUNY Fredonia
- Laura Vrana, University of South Alabama
- Kathryn Warren, University of Texas at Arlington
- Terrance Wellmaker, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville
- Carmin Wong, Pennsylvania State University

### **Data Rangers:**

- Sabrina Bramwell
- Ximena Becerra
- Timothy Brown
- Lindsey Dixon

- Nicole Dixon
- Emily Duru
- Payton Garcia
- Sanaa Harris-Layne
- Rie'onna Holmon
- Jewell Humphrey
- Marcus Jamison
- Nyla Jones
- Bishop Lawton
- Jered Mabaquiao
- Makayla Mallon
- Ayiana N. Newcombe
- Alexandra Omogbadegun
- John Rose
- Camela Sharp
- Raven Shaw
- Al Smith
- Sierra Taylor
- Keshawna Washington
- Jalen White
- Jaya Willis

**University of Kansas Student Researchers:**

**History of Black Writing (HBW):**

- **Research & Data Collection**
  - Abisola Akinsiku
  - Evan Barton
  - Tristan Brothers
  - Maddi Brown
  - Jade Harrison
  - Jackson Hoffmann
  - Jared Ohm
  - Meleah Perez

- Krisdapa Sirasudhi
- Selamawit Yemata
- **Digitization**
  - Tristan Brothers
  - Maddi Brown
  - Isaac Galindo
  - Jade Harrison
  - Onat Kolcu
  - Amar Kamalulrahim
  - Krystle Kwiatkowska
  - Linnaea Radley
- **Current Archives and Collections Index (CACI)**
  - Ashley Simmons
  - Walter Sours
  - Daphne Wagner
- **Promotion**
  - Nafiza Akbar
  - Madison Clark
  - John Cardaronella
  - Avery Hamel
  - Isaac Harosh

## **Institute for Information Sciences**

- **Web Development**
  - Ross Copeland
  - Venkat Karasani
  - Jianpeng (Brian) Li
  - Cody Ptacek
  - Dominic Tassio

## **Design and User Experience**

- **Design**
  - Morgan Botts
  - Ahn (Monica) Can
  - Jasdeep Kaur
- **User Experience**
  - Morgan Botts
  - Ahn (Monica) Can

- Michael Diana
- Randi Gray
- Jasdeep Kaur
- Shawna Shipley-Gates