



Journal of Ethnic
American Literature

Issue 4, 2014

Journal of Ethnic American Literature Issue 4, 2014

ISSN 2159-6786



772159678003

Journal of Ethnic American Literature

Issue 4

2014

Special Issue on Black Poetry and Technology

Guest Editor: Howard Rambsy II

Mississippi Valley State University

Journal of Ethnic American Literature

Issue 4 2014

Editor John Zheng

Editorial Advisory Board Maryemma Graham, *The University of Kansas*
Yoshinobu Hakutani, *Kent State University*
Guiyou Huang, *Norwich University*
Toru Kiuchi, *Nihon University*
Philip C. Kolin, *University of Southern Mississippi*
Arnold Krupat, *Sarah Lawrence College*
Luo Jiansheng, *Southcentral University for Nationalities*
John Muthyala, *University of Southern Maine*
Hermine Pinson, *College of William and Mary*
Howard Rambsy II, *Southern Illinois University Edwardsville*
Jerry W. Ward, Jr., *Dillard University*
Dana Williams, *Howard University*

Journal of Ethnic American Literature (ISSN 2159-6786), a refereed scholarly journal published annually, welcomes articles based upon new research and criticism in ethnic American literature. Each article submitted, with no author's name made known, is to be reviewed usually by one reader and one member of the Editorial Advisory Board. Recommended articles will then be sent to the editor for final decisions.

Submissions with abstracts and keywords, prepared in accord with the revised *MLA Style Manual*, are welcome, but a self-addressed, stamped envelope must be enclosed to guarantee a return or reply. *JEAL* does not consider articles previously published or simultaneously submitted elsewhere. Send submissions to journaljeal@yahoo.com and subscriptions or queries to The Editor, *JEAL*, MVSU 7242, 14000 Highway 82 West, Itta Bena, Mississippi 38941, USA.

The views expressed herein are those of the authors, not the editors. Copyright©2014 by *Journal of Ethnic American Literature*. Contact *JEAL* for copyright permission. The annual subscription rate is \$30 for institutions and \$20 for individuals. For foreign subscriptions add \$20 for postage.

Indexed by the MLA International Bibliography, ProQuest, and EBSCOHost



Member of the Council of Editors of Learned Journals

Back cover photograph: "The Blues Mural, Clarksdale, MS," by J. Guaner

JEAL: Journal of Ethnic American Literature

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Issue 4 2014

ARTICLES

- Introduction: Black Poetry and Technology 4
—Howard Rambsy II
- Hashtag Black Poetry 8
—Theri A. Pickens
- Leveraging Metadata to Present Poet Eugene B. Redmond's
Personal Collection Online 26
—Mary Z. Rose
- Public History and Private Life in Elizabeth Alexander's
Crave Radiance: A Data Analysis 44
—Emily Phillips
- Black Women Poets by the Numbers: Evie Shockley and
Allison Joseph 61
—Briana Whiteside
- The Afrofuturist Poetry of Tracie Morris and Tracy K. Smith 75
—Erin Ranft
- Getting Off at the 13th Floor: Rap Genius and Archiving
21st Century Black Cultural Memory 86
—Regina N. Bradley
- I Thought I Heard Buddy Bolden Say:
Recording the Prehistory of Jazz 99
—Michael J. New
-
- Notes on Contributors 124
Calls for Submissions 126

Introduction: Black Poetry and Technology

Howard Rambsy II

“It is gradually becoming obvious in the early years of the 21st century that inquiry about traditions and their components can make little progress if scholarship and criticism cling to ‘traditional’ methods, if thinkers do not test how interdisciplinary work might yield richer albeit contestable explanations.”

—Jerry W. Ward, Jr., *Journal of Ethnic American Literature* (2011)

During the late 1990s, Alondra Nelson, then a graduate student at New York University, began organizing a series of conversations and an online message board devoted to the interactions among black people, technology, and speculative fictions. The message board was entitled “Afrofuturism,” which participants soon referred to in shorthand as “the list.” There, visual artists, novelists, poets, scholars, musicians, techies, and graduate students shared information about and offered contrasting perspectives on science fiction, hip hop, black history, video games, electronic devices, and the future. The list presented me with a special opportunity to regularly participate in a lively space full of active thinkers from across the country and beyond who enjoyed sharing ideas about the interplay of technology, science

fiction, and black people. Over time, participants found other destinations on the web; their interests shifted; and eventually, the group dissolved.

Yet, the list had usefully informed some of my intellectual, pedagogical, and organizing imperatives. Questions about race, science fiction, and new media became integral to my thinking and research projects. I frequently incorporated assignments in my courses that showcased the convergence of technology and literature. I offered classes on Afrofuturism, and most recently, I designed and taught courses devoted to the crowdsourcing annotation site Rap Genius, which allows web users to present interpretations of lyrics, poems, news stories, and other texts. My experiences with Nelson’s online community also inspired me to seek out collaborators on tech-related projects like this special issue of the *Journal of Ethnic American Literature*.

The lack of scholarly writings concerning technology and African American literary studies as well as the relative dearth of scholarship on modern and contemporary black poetry makes this project especially urgent. Collectively, the contributors to this special issue illustrate, to use Ward’s phrasing, “how interdisciplinary work might yield richer albeit contestable explanations.” The researcher-writers explore aspects of music history, science fiction, hip hop, Afrofuturism, digital collections, contemporary poetry, and data analysis. The articles affirm the diverse manifestations of scholarly work on black poetry and technoculture. Without such work, the discourse about one of our most important art forms would lack essential upgrades.

Scholars of African American literature seeking to learn how social media informs student learning and engagements

have much to gain from “Hashtag Black Poetry” by Theri A. Pickens. Her article, which reflects on a black poetry course that she taught at Bates College in 2014, pinpoints the ways that the use of Twitter enhanced learning and explorations of literary art in a public forum. Mary Rose’s “Leveraging Metadata to Present Poet Eugene B. Redmond’s Personal Collection Online” clarifies the processes of digitizing an accomplished writer’s collected materials and making those items available for perusal and study online. Most notably, Rose’s creativity and leadership building a vibrant online presence for the Redmond Collection reveal the value of an experienced metadata librarian contributing to the preservation and study of African American literary history.

The articles by Emily Phillips and Briana Whiteside emerged from an extended series of bibliographical and blogging activities that we pursued related to 21st-century African American poetry over the last few years. I began developing a collection of volumes of poetry by black writers published since 2000, and at different stages of the project, Phillips and Whiteside assisted with organizing and writing about the books in the collection. Phillips’s “Public History and Private Life in Elizabeth Alexander’s *Crave Radiance: A Data Analysis*” and Whiteside’s “Black Women Poets by the Numbers: Evie Shockley and Allison Joseph” constitute two of the earliest publications that utilize the spirit of “big data” in order to analyze poetry. Phillips examines Alexander’s entire body of work while Whiteside examines how poetry by Shockley and Joseph correspond to works by dozens of other contemporary poets.

Erin Ranft advances the study of Afrofuturism by highlighting the presence and explorations of science fiction

themes in poems by Tracie Morris and Tracy K. Smith. Ranft confirms that poetry, not just novels and films, is a site to consider how artists contemplate and write histories of the future. Whereas Ranft’s article presents the most overt treatment of Afrofuturism, the articles by Regina Bradley and Michael New also correspond to that discourse by concentrating on music, which was consequently a central topic on the Afrofuturism list. Regina Bradley’s “Getting Off at the 13th Floor: Rap Genius and Archiving 21st Century Black Cultural Memory” addresses how the annotation site influences hip hop as a site of remembering and forgetting for listeners, annotators, and readers. Bradley also raises useful questions about the implications of archiving, transcribing, and interpreting rap lyrics on the web. Finally, New’s article “I Thought I Heard Buddy Bolden Say: Recording the Prehistory of Jazz” testifies to the wonderful intellectual journeys awaiting poetry scholars who pay attention to the histories of technological development. Elsewhere, New has produced scholarly writing about audio recordings of poets who have collaborated with jazz musicians, but here New concentrates on the ascendancy of audio recording as he traces the evolution of the Buddy Bolden myth in early jazz history.

I hope someone finds this special issue at just the right moment, like the moment when I discovered Afrofuturism. The articles collectively serve as blueprints for what projects on technology and black poetry might entail. In short, the contributors have provided histories of future work in the fields of American and African American literary studies.

Hashtag Black Poetry

Therí A. Pickens

At the conclusion of my Black Poetry course, I admit to feeling bewildered about how to assess it. I wanted to figure out how my foray into digital humanities¹ (with a Twitter assignment) complemented my students' understanding and aided me in teaching. Given that I am a dilltante in the area of digital humanities, this was not difficult to admit to myself. However, the stakes are high for women of color professors in any classroom and additionally complicated when that classroom explores race, gender, class, sexuality, and ability. Even though I (a Black disabled woman literature scholar), like Bone Crusher before me, "ain't never scared" (2003), it is a vexing proposition to publically discuss my struggles, let alone failures in the classroom.

As Angela P. Harris and Carmen G. González point out in their introduction to *Presumed Incompetent: The Intersections of Race and Class for Women in Academia*, "it is important,

¹ The terms "digital humanities" and "technology" tend to be read racially given that digital humanities is an overwhelmingly white space. In this article, I see the two as interchangeable because an engagement with Twitter harnesses the power of technology and combines the digital with humanistic concerns. In the style of an actual poet, I'd prefer to render "digital humanities" strange as a concept so I will use that term exclusively here.

then, to read even the most seemingly personal stories [...] as symptomatic of a larger, structural problem, rather than solely the issues of any one woman or department, college or campus" (Introduction). Though what follows details my ideas regarding the use of social media (specifically Twitter) to teach African American poetics, my assessment of and conjectures about the course require an attention to the intersections of identity in the college classroom. My experience (and my students') must be examined with an attention to the influence and impact of the various discourses that provide the context for our class. My bewilderment stems from the complications of sorting through pedagogy at the entangled nexus of race, gender, ability, and technology.

This essay both reproduces and performs my musing on my Black Poetry course from the Winter 2014 semester at Bates College. Specifically, I want(ed) to sort through whether/how my use of Twitter created a substantive exploration about Black poetry in a public forum. I start by explaining where I work and students' expectations of my literature classes. Then, I provide the contours of my classroom space to contextualize course material and student learning outcomes associated with the assignment. What follows are a series of anecdotes that explain when and why the assignment succeeded and failed. My compendium should function less as errata for my course and more like an open space where we can all think through the utility of digital humanities and/or technology as a vehicle for engaging Black poetry. I contend that despite some hiccups, using Twitter as a way to converse about Black poetry is well worth the effort.

I work at Bates College in Lewiston, Maine. It is a small, private liberal arts college founded by abolitionists in the mid-

19th century and one of the first to admit people of color and women. With a faculty of 218, Bates educates a student population of approximately 1,800, roughly creating a student to faculty ratio of 10:1. Students who identify as women usually comprise about 50% of the students. As of May 2014, Bates included 20.5% US-born students of color from 44 states and 6.5% international students hailing from 56 countries. A Bates education costs \$62,770 (Quick Facts 2013-14). Given the small student to faculty ratio and the price tag, students (and parents) expect a “high touch” atmosphere in which students will have their affective needs met as they seek effective instruction. High touch has a wide impact on the campus environment, and this expectation operates differently depending on the discipline, social position of the faculty member, and social position of the student. In the English department, my colleagues and I generally have discussion-based classrooms that rely on student interests and faculty prodding to generate dialogue. I tend to give brief lectures (5-10 minutes) to orient students so they have a critical vocabulary with which to engage material. For me, the high touch expectation bears specific implications for my Black female body; it often translates to students’ desire for maternal affect, “Mammy,” on my part. This range includes validating incorrect ideas, refusing to dismiss incorrect ideas; listening to their personal problems (e.g., sexual desires & indiscretions, familial drama); waiving my requirements, policies, or procedures; and dispensing all-manner of advice. I counteract these expectations by addressing them directly on my policy sheet and during the first day.

Some of the expectations are dulled based on the existence of the policy sheet itself. Since it is four pages, the policy sheet seems to exude some professionalism that questions the

desire for mothering. On the first day, I ask them what they expect of the course in terms of level and discussions about identity. I remind them that no one has more access to the material because of their identity and no one has less access based on that premise either. Instead, we approach the material as part of an intellectual enterprise that can have significant personal reverberations. Some students are more poised to accept this as a premise than others. I note that this acceptance is not specific to certain social positions. We return to these ideas often.

In Winter 2014, I taught the first instantiation of my Black poetry course. The guiding questions were about how African American poetic traditions contribute to the literary canon of Black literature and American literature. Since this was an intermediate course (200 level), I designed the course to be both an introduction to Black poetics and a deep exploration. To that end, we moved from the so-called basic questions (i.e., What are Black poetics?) to putatively more sophisticated ones (i.e., How do Black poetics transform the literary and cultural landscape?). As the adjectives “so-called” and “putative” suggest, I hope students would understand that the questions they believed to be basic were actually quite complex. One of my goals was to transition them out of trusting the easy answers to a space of productive skepticism.

I narrowed my pedagogical goals (or student learning outcomes) based on the thrust of the course, exemplified in its title “Collecting Black Verse.” As that title intimates, we focused on collections, specifically one anthology and three books: *Angles of Ascent* (2013) edited by Charles Rowell; *Belloq’s Ophelia* (2002) by Natasha Tretheway; *The new black* (2012) by Evie Shockley; and *Blood Dazzler* (2008) by

Patricia Smith. The purpose was to understand how authors and editors craft a vision. We also examined the picayune details of the verse to grapple with how poets deploy and violate formal rules—be those rules inscribed for racial, cultural, classed, gendered, or sexual reasons. As a scholar and as a pedagogue, my interests veer away from discussing whether a poem classifies as a sestina or a haiku, though that kind of formal concern is significant. My curiosity (and I steer my students in this direction) lies more in asking how the presumed cultural prohibition against Black authors writing sestinas shapes how we read the poem, a formal concern of another sort. In pushing them toward this question, I sought (seek) to provoke students to question how and why they impose rules that determine what counts as poetry and who counts as a poet. In consonance with those aims, the grade was calculated based on their demonstrated skills in thinking as a community (Small Group work 30%), individual participation and intellectual risk (30%), a 5-page midterm paper (20%), and a 10-page final paper (20%).

Prior to explaining the Twitter assignment, I find it useful to briefly outline some of the basics of the social media platform. Twitter is a social networking site designed to “give everyone the power to create and share ideas and information instantly, without barriers” (Twitter). The site democratizes information not only by expanding the amount of people who can dispense and view it, but also by confining the information (tweets) to a pithy 140 characters. Users identify themselves by their handles, signaled by the commercial at (@) before one’s user name. There are several ways to interact: subscribe to another user’s stream of tweets (following). That stream appears on the follower’s timeline (TL). Anyone can follow or

unfollow anyone else. Anyone can also block anyone else. Though users can make their profiles private, tweets are publicly viewed. Tweets can include a variety of user-generated content including pictures, hyperlinks, and video. Followers can choose to merely observe another’s TL, reply to a tweet, retweet specific tweets for their own followers, or favorite another’s tweet. Favoriting a tweet reproduces the effect of bookmarking a site on one’s web-browser. To maintain a conversation or a community, people tweet using the hashtag (#) symbol. When put before a word or phrase, the hashtag functions as a link that makes a conversation easier to find and monitor. During specific events, people may live-tweet using hashtags. For instance, during Food Network’s competitive cooking show, *Chopped*, I live-tweet using the hashtag #Chopped to interact with other users watching the show in real time. Live-tweeting is akin to having a rapid conversation in front of and with thousands of people at once.

My use of Twitter in the class endeavored to complement the students’ ability to think as participants in a community, and expand their critical thinking and reading skills. I thought using Twitter would prompt them to think through why they responded to certain portions of a poem or why they felt comfortable responding to some parts (and not others) in public space. All of these bring to bear the politics of reading and thinking about Black poetry. The poem—when shared—does more than push the audience to emote (to push against transactional reader-response theories) but also questions the parameters and politics of that emotion. The assignment (enfolded into their participation grade) was as follows, “You will be expected to tweet twice weekly with a verse from our reading or a question of your choice (prompted by our reading. You

must tweet me (@TAPPhD) and use the class hashtag (#blackpoetry). Please be mindful of all social graces while on social media.” They had the option of tweeting lines from poetry, snippets from class (with permission), thoughts about class and/or thoughts about the poems. I expected the Twitter assignment would enliven and enlarge our community to include the Twitter-verse (especially Black Twitter). Based on my own interacts with the social networking site, I have found that—when respectful—conversations can expand one’s point of view. To my mind, this was useful as an expansion of the small group to an online community. They would have to deploy skills of diplomacy, active listening, and cogent (and concise) explanations of one’s point of view. As a corollary, I wanted students to engage the outside world in their explorations of poetry. Without overstating my own popularity on Twitter, I figured that many academics might follow or at least be moderately interested in the hashtag.

It is difficult to explain adequately the story of a class dynamic. Classes often feel like large unwieldy machines with a lot of moving parts. The in-class dynamic is only one part. The outside administrative concerns—who needs accommodations, who turns in papers, who takes the course pass/fail, who tries to bilk the system—can be a boon or a distraction. Moreover, there are outside of class dynamics—office hours, students’ relationships with each other, student family concerns, athletics—that also affect one’s learning and teaching. In assessing what occurred with this Twitter assignment, I cannot account for all of these dynamics, nor can I disclose how some of them affected the class. However, I can offer up a brief assessment and a set of ideas that may help moving forward. Of those who participated in the Twitter assignment, many students used it

to tweet lines from the poems. A surprisingly large amount often chose the same lines as their class members. Some took pictures of the poetry and posted those, especially when we dealt with experimental poetry. Only a handful engaged me in conversation. Five posted their thoughts about class and questions that arose after class. Not surprisingly, these were the same students who also engaged me in conversation. None engaged outsiders. Despite the fact that our class conversations were robust and intricate, few aspects of our conversation made it to the Twitterverse. I suspect that lack of conversation stems equally from the limitations of Twitter itself and the student resistance.

Two events—one planned and one unfortunate happenstance—helped me more thoughtfully gauge the extent to which my students were engaged with the Twitter assignment and whether it was working. First, I recruited a guest speaker whose poetry often makes the rounds on YouTube and whose online presence engages a wide variety of political topics. Joshua Bennett, a performance poet, activist, and scholar, came to class during the second week of the term. He spoke to several classes across campus about subjects ranging from prison abolition, to love, to marketing—all with the insightful eye of a logophilic poet. His public performance was a smashing success. We had to move to another room to accommodate all who wanted to attend. The audience included about four-dozen students, a handful of faculty (a feat given we just started the term), and drew in facilities management and custodial staff (mostly white working class folks who tend to be busy at 4 pm cleaning classrooms or preparing for events). It was clear from his poems and the interludes when he contextualized his words that Black poetry has a wide reach. He clarified that his

interests included the topics that people sense are germane to poets (i.e., love, angst) or Black poets (i.e., systemic injustice, righteous indignation) and included other topics seemingly outside the purview of both aforementioned categories (i.e., skateboarding, geek/nerd trivia). For instance, he talked about navigating male cisgendered privilege as Black man, the haptic quality of caring for Black hair (and its gendered implications for him), and the labor-intensive aspect of performing poetry. He dispelled (or ratified, depending on the audience member) that Black people are not magical; he had to write, rehearse, and memorize his poetry for us. In my class, he participated in a conversation regarding the institutional reach of Black poetry and the fetishization of it.

His visit elevated the students' thinking and forced them to reckon with the way that poetry cannot be circumscribed to the page. His presence drew many folks into our conversation about Black poetry and thus fulfilled my initial pedagogical aim. Twitter assisted in this process as it helped us spread the word about Joshua Bennett's visit and prepare the campus for Carvens and Leslie Lissant's visit the following week. The Twitter engagement suggested to me that the students needed some coaching on the goal of the assignment. Though students avidly tweeted, many of the tweets were outbursts of excitement. In some of the tweets I saw, students remained infatuated with Bennett's celebrity or his eloquence at the expense of his content. Some tweets fetishized his Black male body, thinking of him as an anomaly because he is simultaneously a poet, scholar, and activist. It is not my contention that students should have been discouraged from being excited on social media about Bennett's presence; however, their consistent engagement with his celebrity muted them vis-à-vis the content

of our classes and his performance. Given that Twitter often functions as a space for advertisement or celebrity encounter, this seems fairly unsurprising. Asking students to defy convention and discuss poetry flies in the face of this convention. In the future, it might be useful to model how one can engage with celebrity and poetry simultaneously.

Prior to Joshua Bennett's arrival, we all experienced the unfortunate and difficult passing of Amiri Baraka. When Mr. Baraka made his transition, my particular TL was ablaze with articles, commentary on those articles, critiques of Baraka, and snippets of Baraka's poetry. Apropos of his legacy, I too found it befitting to tweet my condolences and discuss in some detail how his poetry and activism affected me: as a poet and scholar. In class, I read two of Baraka's poems ("In Memory of Radio" and "*An Agony. As Now*") as a way to honor him. I followed Evie Shockley's example by speaking his words into the room, so as to give the students a sense of how powerful his words are even without him living.² I readily admitted that I was not the biggest fan of his poetry, though I respected his work. The discussion afterwards (which included Bennett) was a dynamic meditation on the limits and capacities of Black poetry, varying definitions of the genre, authenticity politics, and the (un)intelligibility of Black poetry to others. Despite the robust conversation in class, very little made its way to Twitter. Even though the work inside the classroom

² Shockley "read poetry into the room" at the 2012 NEH Seminar on Contemporary African American Literature. Though she did not state her own pedagogical aim, as a student I understood that she spoke the words as a way for the poetry to leap off the page, and for the poem to linger differently than it would if the class read it silently. I have also watched disability studies scholar, Susan Burch, speak stories into a room and ask for a moment of silence so that people can digest what has been said. In this case, speaking Baraka's words into the room allowed the students to hear his words, see them on the page, and meditate on his passing (even if briefly).

was deliberate and precise, surgical even, conversation seemed to stay inside the four walls of that room.

Looking back at these events, it seems to me to be an admirable failure of sorts. The students' Twitter engagement illuminated how much they were engaged in class and not outside of it. Given that Bates is a four-year residential college, I believed intense student interaction would facilitate the kinds of discussions possible on Twitter. Twitter might be another place, like the dining hall, to actively discuss the concepts from class. Since Bennett's performance was exceptionally well-attended, I was buoyed by the thought that students were actively engaged with the ideas he discussed. Even when the buzz from his visit died down and the initial shock of grieving Amiri Baraka wore off, I found that student engagement in class did not taper much. We traversed a wide range of intellectual territory: discussing the jazz and blues as poetic forms, examining phonemes as constitutive of rhythm, analyzing the violation of formal rules for haiku, pushing against dominant viewpoints regarding Black anger, and exploring the exigencies of Black eco-poetics, among other topics.

I conjecture that there are several reasons why the assignment did not create the kind of robust conversation I had hoped. First, there was little buy in for the assignment. Students were not clear on why the Twitter assignment was so important, so the assignment seemed to occupy the same space as busy work, even for those already active on the site. This is certainly my fault for not being clear with them. In the future, it will be incumbent upon me to introduce the assignment as part of course goals rather than as an addendum, or something exciting to do. As Kelli Cargile Cook reminds us, components of online education should not be merely weak replications of

in-class content, but rather thoughtfully constructed assignments and engagements that align with already articulated pedagogical goals (51). Second, Twitter is an unlikely platform in which to have robust and meaningful conversation. This may have stymied them, especially if they are used to thinking of it as the place they post short phrases, advertise upcoming social events, or broadcast meaningful social exploits. It would be useful to model how Twitter can work to open up robust conversation. Black Twitter's engagement with Paula Deen, Solange and Jay-Z's elevator skirmish, and Black feminist hashtags makes this usefully apparent.

Third, the wider world was not necessarily engaged with them. One person, who aspires to be a rapper, used the hashtag (#blackpoetry) to promote an album. People retweeted them and thoughtfully engaged with me, but there was no formal interaction between my class and other students or poetry enthusiasts. Bryan Carter's work with the *Second Life* platform, where he and another professor in Sweden mandated interaction between students, strongly suggests that student-to-student interaction becomes mutually beneficial in an online environment (Carter). Moreover, the required interaction allows for students to better understand their ideas in a wider context, even if onsite or traditional course instruction also asks them to think of their ideas as part of the wider world. Finally, and I think this is the most important, "to be a digital humanist, one must first be a humanist" (Senchyne). That is, students had to be interested in having these conversations in the wider world, requiring them to push against some considerable apathy and disinterest in poetry writ large and Black poetry in particular. If we are not committed to these questions as more than a moot and rote (some might use academic as an

unfortunate synonym) enterprise, then the desire to discuss them and think through them does not flourish outside the spatial and ideological confines of a bricks and mortar classroom.

In hindsight, I see several missed opportunities during the semester that would have helped curtail the more technical concerns like buy-in, or interaction. Technology cannot be additive as we incorporate it into class. It must be an integrated part of our pedagogy where it appears. For instance, to fix the issue of buy-in, it would have been useful for students to understand that tweeting the poems was not just a way of declaring one's favorite line, but another method of close reading. If one could easily transcribe the poem to Twitter using virgules and spaces, that was suggestive of a specific poetic tradition. Some poems lent themselves easily to transport. The experimental poetry, on the other hand, required pictorial representation, suggesting that it required a different kind of engagement from them. Moreover, the idea that one line was more evocative than another was perhaps useful, but also context dependent. I could have inquired as to why or how the content before and after contributed to the evocative nature of the one line they chose. To think of the tweets as methods of close reading also solidifies the fact that the Twitter assignment teaches us something about how we read in the modern age. It also helps the students understand the more transparent goals on the syllabus—to teach them how to read critically and insightfully.

To tweet lines from a poem also dovetailed with a particular in-class close reading exercise, designed to prompt writing and build skills of interpretation. In class, I ask the students to pick a poem at random. We read it silently to ourselves, turning the book over to signal that we have finished. Then, one student reads it aloud for the entire class. After that, I tell the

students to choose the most important stanza. Once they have done that, I ask them to choose the most important line and, then, the most important word. For ten minutes, I require them to write explaining their choices. Sharing one's work is optional, but usually I share first (to break the ice and reveal that even professors don't create superb first drafts) and then a few other students after me. This exercise makes them aware of the fact that choosing a line as most important, or most interesting is an act of close reading and interpretation. In minutes, they have made a decision based on the available data and their explanation retroactively allows them to trace the logic of their ideas. (As a corollary, it helps them to understand that writing isn't just about expression, but explanation.) In the future, it will be important for me to more directly and emphatically demonstrate how closely related this kind of assignment is to the Twitter assignment.

Creating nuanced and robust conversation on Twitter is not exclusively a technical issue. On the one hand, it would be useful and fairly easy to have another professor and class engaged with my own. On the other, the students have to be willing to be publically conversant with the ideas put forward by Blacks in a public forum, especially in the context of Black poetry. The conversations in class that felt organic and useful could certainly be had in the wider world of Twitter. However, there are other components to consider: trolls, for instance. Some students (of all races) did not use avatars representing themselves, which avoids some problems of representation and accusations of racism. The use of anonymity whether deliberate or not (I truly do not know) quickly reminded me that conversations on social media can easily be misinterpreted. I was also quickly reminded how anonymity facilitates white

student engagement with racial opprobrium. Black poetry requires that we have some serious and complex conversations about anger, culture mores, race, sexuality, and authenticity politics—all of which require more than 140 characters at a time. I don't foresee an easy solution to this concern, except that one has to be willing to participate in these conversations. Keeping in mind the concerns, this assignment allows for the students to think about the relative safety of the classroom environment (which may explain why many retreated into that cocoon) and the necessity of engaging the wider world if cross-cultural coalitions are to be built. Twitter foregrounds the difficulty of, what I consider to be, a larger social justice project of openly having difficult, uncomfortable, and complex conversations.

Some of the classroom concerns were technical, but others speak to a large-scale concern about the nexus of race, poetics, and technology. To be clear: if we follow the Enlightenment logic that we find our liberation in science and technology and that embodied knowledge is suspiciously gained and dangerously deployed, engaging Black poetry on Twitter disrupts not only the sphere of social media, but the very expectations of Western pedagogy. This speaks to the aforementioned issue of context. It is not merely that my Black disabled woman body disrupts the space of the classroom and foregrounds the anxieties others have about Black womanhood. In addition, Black poetry disrupts technological space and calls forth the anxieties others have about Black creative production. Though I was disappointed at the Twitter engagement vis-à-vis Joshua Bennett, it was not altogether surprising that students were—for the most part—more comfortable thinking of him in terms of his celebrity rather than his intellectual and creative enter-

prise. As a celebrity, Bennett's raced and gendered body falls into a familiar narrative about charismatic Black masculinity. As an intellectual, he is far less easily boxed in.

Another example of Black poetics as disruption occurred within the classroom space itself. Several students were resistant to the idea of Black poetics as an intellectual enterprise. They were far more comfortable thinking about how the poem made them feel, and less so exploring formal innovation, phenomena, and critical points of view. Often this led to interpretations that sought solely to understand the poems in light of the reader's experience (i.e. "This reminds me of..."), rather than explanations that sought to make sense of what is on the page. The students' affective readings also led them to make dangerous interpretive leaps: reading authors only in terms of their biography rather than giving room to creative license, or assuming Blackness or working-class identity as inherent lack. I insisted that these were wrong-headed interpretations of the poetry and dangerous readings as well. I also persisted in encouraging the students to approach the poetry as a critical and creative endeavor, a craft for the writers.

My actions did not dovetail with the expectations of a high touch atmosphere. In class, that resulted in some muted participation (i.e., not reading, or only performing cursory readings) or outright hostility (i.e., taking out one's cellular phone during class discussion or writing letters to acquaintances during class time). Outside of class, that resulted in some difficult office hours visits, final and midterm papers never turned in, and accusations of "arrogance" and "intimidation" on my course evaluations. There were those for whom the poetry intervened in their scholastic and personal lives. In class, those students took intellectual risks and pushed themselves to learn

how to better engage language. Outside class, their papers had depth and aplomb, and office hours were a joy. These same students began to incorporate the poetry into their daily lives: one repeats Carolyn Rodgers' "The Last MF" to herself sometimes.

In examining the possibility and pitfalls of engaging Twitter in my Black poetry class, I think on Carolyn Rodgers' work explicitly. Her ironic and repeated use of the expletive "mothafucka" in a poem about leaving the word behind, "The Last MF," succinctly captures my conclusions about the use of technology to teach Black poetics. Even though embracing technology as part of pedagogy for Black Studies suggests leaving embodied knowledge and those who produce it behind, I look as scathingly at that as she does her chosen expletive. However fraught the territory of social media platforms and however antithetical their use appears to studies that centralize unprivileged identity categories, they nonetheless have within the potential to be radically powerful for teaching students the value of critical engagement. The virgule upon which Western engagements with science and technology relies is a crack. To conjure Carolyn Rodgers again, the songs of a Black bird could split it down the middle. That might just be how we get over.

Works Cited

- Crusher, Bone. *AttenCHUN! So So Def*, 2003. CD.
 Cargile Cook, Kelli. "An Argument for Pedagogy-Driven Online Education." *Online Education: Global Questions, Local Answers*. Eds. Kelli Cargile Cook and Keith Grant-Davie. Amityville, NY: Baywood, 2005. 49-66.

- Carter, Bryan. "Virtual Harlem: Building Community." *Telecollaboration 2.0: Language, Literacies, and Intercultural Learning in the 21st Century*. Ed. Sara Guth and Freancesca Helm. Bern: Peter Lang, 2010.
 Harris, Angela P. & Carmen G. González. "Introduction." *Presumed Incompetent: The Intersections of Race and Class for Women in Academia*. Eds. Gabriella Guitierrez y Muhs, Yolanda Flores Neumann, Carmen G. González, and Angela P. Harris. Boulder: UP of Colorado, 2012. Kindle file.
Quick Facts 2013-14. Bates College, 2014. Web. 31 May 2014.
 Rodgers, Carolyn. "The Last MF," *Songs of a Black Bird*. Chicago: Third World P, 1973.
 Senchyne, Jonathan. "Reading Surfaces: Paper, iPhones and Sentimentality." Bates College. Lewiston, Maine. 28 April 2014. Invited Talk.
Twitter. Twitter, 2014. Web. 31 May 2014.