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Afrofuturist Intellectual Mixtapes: A Classroom Case Study

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Introduction

Afrofuturism uses communal methods of creation, novel technological methods, and embodied worldviews and knowledges. This approach should be reflected in the classroom. However, current English pedagogical methods insist students write analyses independently, use technology conventionally, and theorize about works without necessarily embodying the discourses of their creators. The question, then, is how can we produce course outcomes in which students examine and apply aesthetics and discourses in a way that models the artistic methods of Afrofuturism?

In this case study, we present the intellectual mixtape as an answer to this problem. The intellectual mixtape is a pedagogical tool in which students take several samples from an audio corpus on the syllabus and overlay it with their own voice and an audio of their choosing. Students then write “liner notes” in which they discuss their choice of samples, the use of their own voice, and how these choices connect to larger discourses within Afrofuturism. The intellectual mixtape was used as the core assignment in the course *Afrofuturism: To Vibranium and Beyond*, which was taught by Tyechia Thompson and assisted by Dashiel Carrera (GTA) at Virginia Tech.

The Intellectual Mixtape addresses the incongruity between Afrofuturist and traditional academic methods of creation by generating “flow” between students and source material. “Flow” is a concept from David Green’s “Flow as a Metaphor for

Changing Composition Practices” in which students engage in a nonstandard, flexible writing practice, which encourages them to develop their own unique voice rather than adopting the lexicon of traditional academic discourse. This approach encourages students to engage with Afrofuturist work on their own terms and with their own vocabulary, which is more reflective of how Afrofuturist artists, scholars, practitioners, and activists engage with their own source material.

We use the frameworks and methodologies of Brandon T. Locke, Nettrice R. Gaskins, and Mikhail Bakhtin to demonstrate our layered approach to teaching the intellectual mixtape assignment and to show the interconnections between digital humanities, Afrofuturism, dialogism, and flow. Locke’s framework of a digital liberal arts curriculum allowed us to contextualize the intellectual mixtape as an effective assignment for developing multimodal skills within the humanities, Gaskins’s methodology of Afrofuturists techno-vernacular-creativity supports the intellectual mixtape as an assignment that encourages students to create as Afrofuturists, and Bakhtin’s internally persuasive discourse supports our position that students develop their own words and meanings in their intellectual mixtape tracks.

Our paper proceeds as follows: we will first describe the seven-part layout of the Afrofuturist intellectual mixtape assignment. Next, we provide three key aspects to teaching the intellectual mixtape course module. We will then formulate the digital humanities (DH) and Afrofuturist intellectual frameworks that serve as the foundation for this project. We then discuss sampling, conversing, and “flowing” in relationship to these DH and Afrofuturist frameworks and examine four examples of students’ work. Afterwards, we describe the process of preparing for the students’ midterm performance

in which their mixtapes were curated and heard for a public audience. In the final part of the paper, we question whether US Copyright Law is antithetical to multimodal digital literacy studies, flow, and an empathic engagement with Afrofuturist source texts, and speculate about future uses of the intellectual mixtape.

Intellectual Mixtape Assignment: Project Description

The intellectual mixtape is an audio-visual-textual assignment with seven-parts. In part one, students listen to audios (such as lectures, poems, songs, interviews, etc.) that are assigned (on the syllabus) for homework and class discussion. For the second part, students learn the basics of audio editing in order to create their first tracks of the intellectual mixtape. The practice audio editing assignment is created improvisationally by having the students focus on learning the mechanics of audio editing in a fast-paced environment. Their track selections and the mixing decisions are for the most part impromptu. For the third part, students create the first of three audio tracks, which is 1 min long. All audio tracks must include at least three regions of audio: a sample from an audio on the syllabus, a region with their own voice in their own words, and a region of their choosing. As a companion to each track, students write 500 words of liner notes that includes a title for the track and their curation and mixing decisions. For the fourth part, students create a second track that is 1.5 minutes in length. This track is a collaboration with another student in the course; it also features a sample from the syllabus, a region with their own voices in their own words, and a region of their choosing with liner notes. The fifth part of the assignment is a third audio track that is between 1.5 to 2 minutes in length, and collaboration is optional; the third track features

the same criteria for regions and liner notes. For the sixth part, the students post their three-track mixtape online (often in a web template service such as Wix) with liner notes and include “remixed” or original cover art. In part seven, students perform the intellectual mixtape. The intellectual mixtape assignment teaches students skills such as audio editing, process writing, collaborating, audio-visual synchronizing, thematic-website-template building, and performing.

Teaching the Module

There are three aspects of the Afrofuturists intellectual mixtape assignment that were instrumental to our approach to teaching the module—the first is curating the syllabus; the second is creating a tech survey; and the third is teaching the basics of audio-editing in one class session. First, curating the syllabus for the intellectual mixtape requires finding a sufficient number of audios—preferably MP3—and making them available on the syllabus for study and assignments. It is important to note that the syllabus is not limited to audios. For instance, Samuel R. Delany’s short story “aye, and Gomorrah” was course reading, but it was paired with an audio interview with Delany. Furthermore, the syllabus only included audios that are primary sources in which the Afrofuturist artists, scholars, activists, and/or practitioners spoke about their own work. The videos are selected from platforms such as YouTube and Vimeo and then converted to MP3s. There are two distinctions that determine how the audios/videos are featured on the syllabus: videos that are “live action” of the Afrofuturist are added to the syllabus directly, but videos that are slideshows or still photos were converted to MP3 and put on the syllabus as MP3s.

Second, we began the course *Afrofuturism: to Vibranium and Beyond* with a tech survey to get an inventory of the students' tech needs, exposure and comfortability with the technologies we will use in class.¹ We sent out the survey a week before class. The survey helped us to determine if students will need loaner equipment; whether they will work with Audacity or GarageBand to learn audio editing or if we would teach both; and our approach to teaching audio editing so that the students become comfortable and proficient enough to complete the assignment. Our survey had eight questions and was distributed on Survey Monkey.²

Third, we taught the students GarageBand or Audacity, which is a learning objective for the intellectual mixtape assignment. Teaching an overview of audio-editing in one-class session (seventy-five minutes) requires some preparation before class such as requiring that everyone has GarageBand or Audacity (with Lame encoder) installed on their computers by the start of class; creating a shared drive that is available with MP3/WAV files for students to select audios; and disseminating written instructions of what we are covering in class while a demonstration is facilitated in real time. A screencast is made available, so students can watch the demonstration later. We give the students fourteen tasks to complete after they open the program.

The students' execution of the audio-editing practice assignment is fast-paced and improvisational. Because of the time pressure of the assignment, students must

¹ Tyechia Thompson first used a tech survey in her courses in 2016 at the recommendation of Bryan Carter, Ph.D., Director of the Center for Digital Humanities.

² <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/ZB7KSPS> (I need to make sure the survey is not open).

work quickly and performatively in a way that they normally would not. They are learning and creating on the fly. As a result, we are not concerned if the practice audio makes sense, and it is not significant if the track stops abruptly. Instead, when this assignment is assessed, we are checking to see if 1) we have received the assignment as an MP3 or as a WAV file, 2) the assignment is 1 minute in length, 3) the track has three different layers — one of which is the student's voice, 4) the track includes a fade-in or fade-out at some point in the recording, and 5) the track has an effect (it could be a duplicate sound, reverbs, etc.). This gives us an indication that the student has completed the basics and can build on this knowledge (learning more features) to execute the Afrofuturist intellectual mixtape project.

Curating the syllabus with sufficient and appropriate audios that feature the Afrofuturist artists, scholars, activists, and/or practitioners discussing their work is the substratum of the intellectual mixtape assignment. It is the basis of how the students develop flow, sample, and engage in internally persuasive discourse and techno-vernacular creativity. Creating the tech survey allows us to prepare for our students, so that they have access to equipment and software and ample time to finish assignments. Without this kind of preparation, the course could become bottle-necked by the technology and divert focus from the course content. Finally, teaching the basics of audio-editing in a one-class session (seventy-five minutes) is one aspect that makes the intellectual mixtape assignment a digital humanities project. The assignment is multimodal and encourages students to develop their own voices as scholars.

DH and Afrofuturist Frameworks

In Brandon T. Locke's article "Digital Humanities Pedagogy as Essential Liberal Education: A Framework for Curriculum Development" in the *Digital Humanities Quarterly* special issue *Imagining the DH Undergraduate: Special Issue in Undergraduate Education in DH*, he provides a framework for digital humanities projects or what he calls digital liberal arts curriculum. He argues that the liberal arts are well suited for the integration of digital skills given the course goals of liberal arts courses. He writes:

"Educators in the liberal arts must continue to grapple with emerging forms of communication and analysis, or we risk leaving our students lacking in critical areas of the liberal arts. Media and information literacies and multimodal and digital writing skills are essential for effective communication and civic engagement now and in the future, and liberal arts courses must engage with them. This flexible and extensible framework offers one fruitful route, by developing digital humanities projects intended to impart such skills while engaging with domain-specific content" (par. 52) [Locke].

Locke uses the term "domain" to suggest the discipline of a specialist that is taught to students alongside technical objectives. Locke's framework is useful for understanding the intellectual mixtape module. This assignment as presented in the course *Afrofuturism to Vibranium and Beyond* engages the domain-specific content of Afrofuturism alongside media and communication literacies. The intellectual mixtape module meets the course outcomes for many liberal arts courses through teaching skills

such as process writing, collaborating, engaging discourses, articulating one's perspective, text and audio-editing, and managing projects.

Furthermore, Nettrice R. Gaskins's essay "Afrofuturism on Web 3.0" in Reynaldo Anderson and Charles E. Jones's *Afrofuturism 2.0: The Rise of Astro-Blackness* provides another useful framework for understanding the intellectual mixtape assignment. Gaskins's methodology of techno-vernacular creativity is reflected in the intellectual mixtape assignment. In the essay, Gaskins describes techno-vernacular creativity as a creation method consisting of appropriation, improvisation, and reinvention. In terms of appropriation, Gaskins writes that Afrofuturists "reclaim cultural artifacts, often to counter dominant social or political systems" (30). Appropriation of a similar kind is evident in the intellectual mixtape assignment. Students appropriate audios (sample) from the syllabus and use those audios to create or center their own world views. Gaskins describes Afrofuturists improvisations as "performing, creating, problem solving, or reacting in the moment and in response to one's environment and inner feelings" (30-1) [Gaskins]. In the intellectual mixtape assignment, students improvised their audio-editing demonstration by learning and making creative decisions quickly (as noted above), and they also improvised during performance in the Cube when they interacted with audience members.³ Lastly, Gaskins describes reinvention (of the self) as techno-vernacular creativity due to the way "Afrofuturists often use digital and non-digital avatars as tools for transcendence, reinvention, or for existing in and moving between worlds or realities" (31) [Gaskin]. Reinvention (of the self) was adopted

³How we taught audio-editing and how the students created the interactive Afrofuturist experience in the Cube at Virginia Tech will be described in more detail later in this essay.

by most students creating futuristic content and taking on a pseudonym such as Grim Reaper, FutureShe, StarGirl, or a physical avatar (that occasionally participates in a narrative the student created) for the intellectual mixtape assignment. This reinvention of the self is significant because students model this Afrofuturists aesthetic without prompting. The use of appropriation (sampling), improvisation, and reinvention within the intellectual mixtape assignment are just some of the ways that the students' mixtapes are created from an Afrofuturists framework. Locke's and Gaskins's frameworks in digital humanities and Afrofuturism, respectively, show how this assignment integrates a digital liberal arts curriculum as well as Afrofuturist techno-vernacular creativity.

Our framing of digital humanities and Afrofuturism in the intellectual mixtape assignment is a dialogic process, specifically an internally persuasive discourse. In *Dialogic Imagination*, Mikhail Bakhtin defines internally persuasive discourse as “more akin to retelling a text in one's own words, with one's own accents, gestures, modifications” (424) [Bakhtin]. Bakhtin's concept claims that one's own word is already interwoven with someone else's words, and this interweaving creates new words. As such, the intellectual mixtape is an application of internally persuasive discourse in that students select audio from the syllabus and synthesize it with and/or juxtapose it against their own voice. The students' words mix/assimilate with the other audios and create their own words. Bakhtin's internally persuasive discourse provides a useful framework for understanding how students develop their own discourse in the intellectual mixtape.

Though varied, Locke's, Gaskins's, and Bakhtin's frameworks and methods show the layered approach to teaching and executing the intellectual mixtape assignment.

The assignment's goals (audio editing, process writing, composing, collaborating, etc.) are prevalent within the liberal arts and incorporate the use of media technologies. This approach to teaching Afrofuturism encourages students to engage and create using Afrofuturists methods of appropriation, improvisation, and reinvention of the self. Also, through the dialogic process of creating the intellectual mixtape tracks, students have an opportunity to develop their own ideas in conversation with the assigned Afrofuturists audios.

Sampling, Conversing, and Flowing

In "Flow as a Metaphor for Changing Composition Practices," David Green addresses the importance of students developing and expressing authority, fluency, and flow with language through hip hop as a model for composition.⁴ Specifically, Green defines flow as "a construct that helps to clarify and usefully extend discussions about language, diversity, invention, and voice" (175). Green's articulation of flow comes from a position that critical writing is not limited to academic writing and that students in particular can benefit from critiquing standardized English to develop flexible writing practices that include vernacular in order to engage various audiences, traditions, and histories. Green writes that "flow provides an interesting way of positioning writing for students by focusing discussions of language and composing on features such as rhythm, vernacular eloquence, and layering and rupture in ways that press for newer considerations of language and literature within English studies" (176) [Green]. Green's

⁴ Tyechia Thompson sampled the Intellectual Mixtape Assignment from David Green who had assigned the Intellectual Mixtape as a flexible type of annotated bibliography to his graduate students at Howard University.

exploration of how flow can be incorporated in English composition courses is a springboard for the intellectual mixtape project, which adopts Green's concept of flow into audio-visual and written compositions in *Afrofuturism: To Vibranium and Beyond*, which was offered as an English special topics course.

Flow as a nonstandard, flexible writing practice is expanded when adopted in text and audio compositions. In creating their intellectual mixtapes, students use the techniques of sampling and conversing to contextualize their discourse and world views and to further develop their own meanings—their flow. Moreover, the students who create intellectual mixtapes are composing within the tradition that DJ Kool Herc, a founder of hip hop music, created when he isolated and repeated the breakbeat on records, which allowed for him to create his own meaning through looping part of the song. His technique allowed for other contexts of the beat (how it would be used--sampling), expanded the conversation of the beat (where the beat would be heard), and developed an expression for future flows to emerge.

In an interview on *Fresh Air*, Kool Herc describes finding records to expose to his audience and watching his audience's anticipation of a record's breakbeat. He states: "When we first heard a record called "Seven Minutes of Funk." We heard it in a place called (um) at Hunt's Point. And Jay-Z used it, and a few other people used that same record. And that came out of my collection. And when we played that record, or what we did, Coke [La Rock] did it. Coke put the record on, and we all walked off the stage" [DJ Kool Herc] [DHQ AV, 1]. What DJ Kool Herc describes above are contexts and conversations that emerge from the record "Seven Minutes of Funk;" he explains how each iteration of "Seven Minutes of Funk" flows with its own meaning and authority--

whether it is from Jay-Z's "Ain't No Nigga" or YG's "Why You Always Hatin."

Furthermore, though DJ Kool Herc's technique is a founding aesthetic of hip hop music, it is connected to Gaskins's techno-vernacular creativity through Herc and Coke La Rock providing an improvisational conversation to occur between the song and the live audience, and through how the sample (appropriation) is reinvented in each iteration with artists such as Jay-Z and YG (which is also a conversation).⁵ This same process of sampling and conversing in the intellectual mixtape assignment is what creates flow in David Green's articulation of the term. It is in students' flow that their intentions, voice, self-acceptance, and diversity emerges. We will now examine four students' tracks for how students' flow is expressed.

An intellectual mixtape track "Xe3" (pronounced Chi) by TSaunds features conversation and flow. In "Xe3," TSaunds samples "Tales of Dr. Funkenstein," "Venus Fly" by Grimes and Janelle Monáe, and "Window Licker" by Aphex Twin. TSaunds mixing of these audios led to his creation of a story of a young man being teleported from his apartment to Xe3 (a planet in another universe) through a funky Spotify transmission [DHQ AV, 2]. In the liner notes, TSaunds writes:

I used this beat [a sound effect from "Window Licker"] because it connects to George Clinton's claim that P-Funk is constantly evolving and always present to those who want the funk and its liberty. In fact, the funk and its vibrations [are] what help the young man be connected with Xe3. Additionally, Grimes is one of

⁵ It is important to note that the intellectual mixtape assignment is clearly a part of the jazz tradition, particularly through the aesthetics of improvisation and conversation. This tradition is examined in the course, especially through the music and teachings of Sun Ra. Also, DJ Kool Herc's example of sampling "Seven Minutes of Funk" is a nod to Afrofuturism through the funk genre's connection to black freedom, utopianism, and the space age.

my favorite artists and her collaboration with Janelle Monáe on the song and music video is pure genius and sci-fi. Layered with this beat are various clips of audio from *Tales of Dr. Funkenstein*. [TSaunds]

TSaunds explains that he is evolving P-funk through his sampling of a sound effect from “Window Licker.” He uses the liberty of P-funk to sample Grimes and Janelle Monáe and further develop a sci-fi sound. He also samples clips from *Tales of Dr. Funkenstein*, a documentary on George Clinton, for additional context of P-funk. TSaunds’ flow emerges as the unique story he tells of a liberatory teleportation and is a direct result of the conversations with the tracks he samples.

While flow can emerge through mixing texts, audios, and/or videos, flow also emerges through the uniqueness of one’s own voice. This kind of flow is present in the Afrofuturist intellectual mixtape track “One Who Procrastinates” by Grim Reaper. On the track, Grim Reaper’s voice is clear, deliberate, and grand. His voice dominates the track. He begins “One Who Procrastinates” by introducing himself as a human and the subject of the track: “Too often in life people, such as myself, fall victim to a lingering problem known as procrastination.” The track’s opening includes a sample of Stevie Wonder’s “Saturn” playing in the background and the image of red nebula for his cover art. Independently and collectively, the audio-visual aesthetics are fitting for an Afrofuturist track and are reminiscent of the *Star Wars* opening crawl—clear, deliberate, and grand. For the second half of the track, Grim Reaper transitions to a solution for procrastination, and he changes the sample as well. His solution has a similar inflection as his opening; he states: “Luckily, one can overcome their habit of procrastination if they simply turn to a certain personality trait that is known as diligence. He samples

“Intergalactic” by the Beastie Boys to “give the listener more than one reason to feel pumped for the positive part of [his] message” (Grim Reaper). Grim Reaper creates flow by making the focus of his track his own voice--even his samples were selected to amplify his message.[DHQ AV, 5]

There are two Afrofuturist tracks where self-acceptance emerges from flow. The first track is titled “FAT GYALS” by Lauren Garretson and Starg*rl [DHQ AV, 7]. The students who created this track use humor, irony, pain, stereotypes and assumptions about fat, black women. They present a series of images for the “Fat Girl Starter Pack” that include “cookies before and after dinner,” “eating just because I can,” “great singer—must be gospel, must be soul, must be pain,” “can I do anything for more than 10 minutes?,” and “arms that won’t stretch all the way around.” Lauren Garretson and Starg*rl reify their conversation by speaking at the same time, repeating and/or responding to each other. They also affirm fat, black women through the track’s intro that features an audio excerpt from the movie *Phat Girlz* in which the character Jazmin Biltmore (Mo’Nique) and her friend Stacey are ordering food at a fast food restaurant. Stacey proceeds to order for Jazmin (on the skinny side of the menu), but Jazmin modifies the order and adds “the works.” Additionally, by putting their words in conversation with Erykah Badu’s lyrics from “On and On” that “If we were made in his image then call us by our names/Most intellects do not believe in god, but they fear us just the same,” Lauren Garretson and Starg*rl align themselves and their image with G/god. In their liner notes, Lauren Garretson and Starg*rl write, “all our complexities around body and food and womanhood will not shut us out from a new world, planet,

mothership connection or community of aliens.” The track “FAT GYALS” is an Afrofuturist audio conversation about presence, inclusion, and acceptance.

Flow is also demonstrated through sonic, rhetorical layering in the track “Space Less” by FutureShe [DHQ AV, 8]. FutureShe begins her track with a personal understanding of space and place that is framed by one of the most well known Afrofuturist choruses “space is the place” from Sun Ra’s song, self-titled album and film *Space is the Place*. While a context of Afrofuturist acceptance is suggested through the canonized song, FutureShe’s flow presents otherness and doubt regarding the possibility of experiencing an utopic space outside of herself. She begins, “Will there be space for me—for all of me?” Her voice also suggests that she must find her space since elsewhere is inhabited by others. FutureShe then mixes FKA Twigs’s “How’s That” into her track. FKA Twigs’s voice becomes her companion, initiating her to turn within. In her liner notes, FutureShe writes, “I attempt to exemplify the sort of internal struggles and frustrations with space here on Earth that may eventually lead people to seek space, literally and figuratively, elsewhere.” FutureShe’s track is a flow that uses samples to produce a perspective that the only space where we can truly be accepted is within ourselves.

The creation and performance of the intellectual mixtape provided opportunities for students to engage popular, academic, and mystical discourses connected to Afrofuturists art and practices. The audios the students sample and mix provide them with digital media skills used in the digital humanities. The process of audio editing also expands how many students engage with language, meaning, and interpretation in an English special topics course. This permits an internally persuasive discourse to be

expressed--one in which the students' own ideas are accented from the words of others. Through their sampling and conversing with assigned audios, the intellectual mixtape assignment opens up opportunities for students to flow and express what matters to them in terms of sound, perspective, acceptance, and diversity. The students' insights about Afrofuturism gained through the intellectual mixtape assignment became an interactive experience of Afrofuturism with empathy at the center of its creation.

Preparing for Performance

This performance part of the assignment was predominately student-led. We asked thought-provoking questions and created an environment for students to apply Afrofuturists concepts, practices, and discourses to create their performance. *Sound of Space: An Interactive Afrofuturist Experience* was performed in the Cube, a 42ft high performance and research space in the Moss Arts Center at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. The Cube has a high-density loudspeaker array of 150 loudspeakers. These loudspeakers spread around the entire perimeter, up the walls, and on the ceiling of the Cube to allow for fully immersive sound. The Cube is specially designed for spatial computer music research. Vector Based Amplitude Panning is used so that audience members can precisely pinpoint a sound source from any point in the room [Lyon, 2016]. The Cube can fit up to 198 people and features the Cyclorama, an optional large 360-degree-panoramic projection wall in the center.

Conceiving of the Space

In preparation for the midterm intellectual mixtape performance, we (and staff members of the Institute for Creativity, Arts and Technology) led discussions for the students about ways to adapt the mixtapes to the space. Students decided to create an environment in which the audience could freely navigate the space rather than having a fixed separation between the audience and stage. This holds its roots in the Afrofuturist ideal that the demarcation between artist and audience member results in an imbalanced power relationship that should be actively worked against [Gaskins]. Students felt that this would allow the audience to fully embody the space in the spirit of the mixtape creation. They also argued that being able to float freely between different corners of the Cube would allow for improvisational movement that would reflect the Afrofuturist desire to find freedom in space [*Space is the Place*, Sun Ra]. Students decided to make the Cyclorama the centerpiece of the exhibit. In this they projected an oscillating image of space and played ambient white noise (similar to that heard on an airplane or spaceship) from overhead. The Cyclorama, filled with the sound of space, served as the meditative home base from which the movement (toward the Afrofuturist spatialized sounds) took place.

Developing the Title and Poster [DHQ AV, 10]

In addition to designing the space itself, students had to conceive of a title and work with an undergraduate-graphic designer to make the poster. Title brainstorming was conducted over multiple hour long meetings. Students played word association games and constructed “word salad” in order to think generatively about the language space associated with Afrofuturism. As they continued to conceive of the title in relation

to the space, they eventually arrived at “Sound of Space” to evoke the meditative “spaceship” sound played overhead the Cyclorama [DHQ AV, 9].

Grouping and Looping the Mixtape Tracks

We then facilitated the students as they grouped the mixtapes into four categories that were played on a loop during the performance: Flow, Transport, Testimony, and Funk. The students felt that each of these categories were representative not only of their mixtapes as a whole but also of different themes within Afrofuturist discourse. “Flow” focused on rhythm and transformation of the self, as in FutureShe’s “Space Less,” in which she explores how to carve out a space for herself as a black body on Earth. “Transport” focused on the African diaspora and the connection between abduction in the African-American slave narrative and alien abduction in science-fiction narratives (as in the film *Space is the Place*, in which Sun Ra is abducted by a group of white scientists working for NASA who hope to uncover how he travels through space). In “Testimony” students expressed, confessed, and preached their experiences with various forms of oppression, which reflects Sun Ra’s testimony of his experience in *Space is the Place*. In “Funk,” students focused on the Afrofuturist connection between creator and consumer, in which a communal dance welcomes all (as is the case with Parliament Funkadelic’s “We Got the Funk,” which student Spacer points out in his liner notes⁶).

⁶ He writes, “...I chose one of my favorite songs I’ve heard so far, We Got the Funk by Parliament Funkadelic. By using a song that I love, and singing along to it, I’m showcasing that connection between creator and consumer. The choices of wording that I used—;sung from the heart, I love this song, safe in your space’—are meant to nod towards the space needed and created for black creativity out of the Afrofuturism movement as well as the connection previously mentioned.”

Once the students' tracks were grouped together, each group was mixed, sequenced and spliced into four singular looping audio tracks. Students utilized the Cube's unique ability to spatialize audio to have each of the tracks played from a different corner of the Cube simultaneously. This is reflective of Sun Ra's idea that creation is a form of teleportation as it is in *Space is the Place*. As audience members walked around the perimeter of the Cube, the sound of the next corner would slowly grow louder and the previous corner quieter until audience members were fully immersed in the sound of the next group. In this way, they were "transported" between each audio grouping--transportation, funk, flow, and testimony--spatially. This slow gradient of mixed audios was part of the students' design as well; the hope was that this blended and improvisational sound would reflect the sampling and mixing of the mixtapes. This balance had to be carefully checked by the GTA to make sure the sounds did not overwhelm and compete with one another.

Adding Props and Visual Elements

Though sound is the substratum of the *Sound of Space* performance, students wanted to communicate meaning and feeling through more than sound and space imagery in the Cyclorama. The students understood empathic engagement as a core tenet to the creation of Afrofuturist art [Hinton]. They added props and visual aids to each of the four corners of the Cube as a means of increasing empathic engagement with the audience. While 360-degree-virtual reality has been correlated to positive empathetic response [Bertrand, 2018], it was our hope that likewise the 360-degree-panoramic projection wall of the Cyclorama and the interactive-immersive experience in the Cue

would foster empathy and embodiment among audience members. To produce this, upon entering the Cube, each person was asked to beat a Garifuna Drum upon entering.

Additionally, for the “Transportation” corner a montage of alien imagery and footage from the *Blair Witch Project* was created through the contribution of an undergraduate videographer. [DHQ AV, 11]. This footage allowed the audience to experience first-hand the jarring nature of alien and colonialist abduction. This footage was played on a loop. Also, the “Funk” corner also contained a looped montage, but of various funk, dance and Motown musicians, including Michael Jackson and Parliament Funkadelic [DHQ AV, 12]. This footage was selected by the students, who found videos they felt were aesthetically cohesive on YouTube and sent them to the videographer. These images were meant to celebrate Afrofuturism as a form of embodied, innovative, eclectic, and physical expression.

Next, the “Flow” corner featured an aromatherapy diffuser with lavender scent. This corner encouraged audience members to close their eyes and tune into their other senses, rather than fixating on the strict visual presence before them [DHQ AV, 13]. One of the student tracks in this corner asks, “will I be able to find the space within me?” In this spirit, this corner encouraged audience members to look inward to find a sense of space. Lastly, the “Testimony” corner featured a variety of artifacts and instruments from African cultures, and encouraged audience members to participate in the cathartic cleansing of testifying [DHQ, 14]. We adorned a table with a traditional African mud cloth, a bowl (symbolically full of water for cleansing hands and ears), candles, a tambourine, precious stones, an African statue, and an African shield. The students felt that these objects would help bring the audience aesthetically closer to the testimonies

in this corner's mixtape tracks, and that "the water" would help the audience embody the feeling of cleansing.

Performance

The midterm intellectual mixtape performance took place on March 7th, 2019 in the middle of the afternoon. [DHQ AV,16] Members from both the Virginia Tech and the Blacksburg community flowed through the Cube to see the performance. Midway through the hour and fifteen-minute performance, four students from the course *Improvvised and Devised Performance* taught by Devair Jeffries and Al Evangelista gave two ten minute performances in the Cyclorama, which responded to and evolved from the sounds in the space and the audience in the Cube. As intended, many audience members spent significant time seated in the center of the Cyclorama, examining the moving stars. From there, they charted their own courses through the Cube, taking pictures and exchanging experiences. Students in our Afrofuturism course floated through the space to provide guidance and answer questions as needed.

Considering Copyright Law

During the *Sound of Space* performance, community members from the Virginia Tech and Blacksburg area engaged in conversation with each other, members of the Afrofuturism class, and Afrofuturist art. The result was not a performance in which audience members and artists were sharply demarcated, but rather one in which both parties freely exchanged ideas on a level playing field. This holds its roots in Gaskins's ideal that in Afrofuturism, "improvisation, call and response, hacking, and tinkering elicit

the active engagement and participation of the at-large community (audience)” [Gaskin, 29]. Similarly, the intellectual mixtape was created as a means of letting students engage in deep conversation with the works of Afrofuturist artists, rather than analyzing Afrofuturist work as critics or passive third-party observers/reviewers. In both cases, the goal was to synthesize and/or juxtapose the interpreter’s (student’s or audience member’s) own artistic voice with that of the artist. However, this collage-style-artistic practice is discouraged by US Copyright Law. Creating the intellectual mixtape may even constitute copyright infringement.

Under the US Code of Laws, a “derivative work” such as the intellectual mixtape requires a “master use” license, which can only be obtained by mutual agreement between the owner of the recording and the licensee [17 US Code, § 106]. In the case of the intellectual mixtape, the owners of the recordings were mostly large record labels too difficult to contact in such a short time frame.⁷ The legal penalties for not obtaining proper licenses are unduly severe. Statutory Damages for each case of infringement can be up to \$30,000 [17 US Code, § 504c]. This means that in this Afrofuturism course, damages could total \$900,000.

Is Copyright Law Fair?

US Copyright Law discourages the embodiment of Afrofuturist tracks despite the demonstrated pedagogical benefits. As such, we are left wondering if US Copyright Law ought to undergo revision. US Copyright law privileges research on music over a

⁷ There are two ways of avoiding copyright infringement in creating an Intellectual Mixtape, but all pose problems: 1) Using music for which the copyright has deliberately been waived by the artist; 2) Negotiating master use licenses with independent artists. Both options provide little help because music of these categories generally come from small independent artists who are rarely popular enough to have had a large cultural impact. If students performed a study using only these songs, they would be prevented from exploring the core texts of Afrofuturism.

century old and many films prior to 1964, for which the copyright has already expired.⁸

Music of this age predates most original recorded music, and in particular, all of the audio content that was included on the syllabus was created within the last 60 years.

Furthermore, by limiting the appropriate sample length to 10% of a song, US Copyright Law discourages a serious embodiment of any musical recording, which is a fundamental pillar of the Afrofuturist mixtape.⁹ In our class, many students had samples that were longer than 10% of a song. This was because students were encouraged to converse with the discourses of Afrofuturism and use them in their own creative process. In the spirit of Bahktin's internally persuasive discourse, we want to encourage academic work that is "affirmed through assimilation, tightly interwoven with 'one's own word...' half-ours and half-someone else's" [Bahktin]. We hope for our students to engage with the material in a way which forces them to converse with and think carefully through the discourses of Afrofuturist creators so that they become creators themselves, rather than using short quotations that subordinate or elevate the students' perspective. In contrast, we argue for the Afrofuturist techno-vernacular creativity identified by Nettrice Gaskins, in which reappropriation of cultural artifacts is part of "counter-dominant social or political systems" [Gaskins]. We feel this reappropriation

⁸ As of Donald Trump's 2018 signing of the Music Modernization Act, music copyright generally lasts a century [Music Modernization Act, 2018]. However, a significant number of Afrofuturist music was published within the last half a century. This means that most significant Afrofuturist works are still protected under US Copyright Law.

⁹ Fair Use, as defined in the Copyright Act of 1976, is a law which permits brief excerpts of copyrighted material to be used under certain circumstances, including when it is for education, scholarship, or research [17 US Code, § 106]. Given this provision, one might hope that the intellectual mixtape would be considered Fair Use. While the US Code provides no strict definition for determining Fair Use, this does not appear to be the case [17 US Code, § 106].

The US Code of Law provides guidelines for determining Fair Use in lieu of a strict definition [17 US Code, § 106]. Whether or not a particular case constitutes Fair Use is left up to the courts to determine. Therefore, any educator can be taken to court for copyright infringement, even if their case constitutes Fair Use. The US Copyright Office attempts to provide some guidance for these court decisions. [US Copyright Office Circular 21]. However, it is not clear how these guidelines apply, because they were developed by a committee of Music Publishers and Music Educators in 1976 for the music classroom, not for digital humanities classrooms. However, one provision states that: "For other than performance, single or multiple copies of excerpts may be made, provided that the excerpts do not comprise a 'performable unit as a section,' and never more than 10% of the work, and only one copy per pupil." This suggests that the intellectual mixtape may be legal so long as only 10% of each song is used. However, for a typical three-minute song, this is only about 18 seconds.

should be uninhibited by legal regulation, and encourage our students to join the continuum of borrowing and remixing that is so fundamental to Afrofuturist work.

Additionally, in his 2010 Langston Hughes Visiting Professorship Lecture at the University of Kansas, Professor Adam Banks asks:

Will we stand with a set of copyright and intellectual property codes, laws and conventions, that have pushed more and more severely in the direction of huge corporate interests...?

He also notes that every course syllabus forms “a mixtape compilation of other’s text and ideas compiled, ranging, combines, with our own various critical gestures...”

[Banks]. As such, it seems antithetical to academic practice to have one form of compilation be suppressed while others are allowed to flourish. Why must we limit ourselves to short quotations of these audio text sources when we know full well that academic discourse is a constant resynthesis of existing ideas? Why should the intellectual mixtape be forced to conform to the narrative that sources of knowledge can be easily traced and attributed, when academic discourse often involves a recombination of internally persuasive ideas?

Speculation/Future

The various pedagogical methods here could be deployed in any number of DH classrooms, not just in the context of an Afrofuturism course.¹⁰ The ideas of remix, flow, and embodied knowledge are increasingly becoming a part of academic and artistic creation today. As such, it makes sense for other courses within liberal arts and social sciences, particularly those that have a substantial corpus of audio materials, to use the

¹⁰ Tyechia Thompson has used the intellectual mixtape assignment in five different courses.

intellectual mixtape as a new form of academic discourse. The intellectual mixtape does not necessarily have to be a replacement for traditional academic discourse. It could be used in conjunction with traditional academic writing as a means of getting the student to engage with primary sources in as many ways as possible or as a way of prompting a student to engage empathically with an audio text before they use it to support their own theories.

While replicating the performance in the Cube is near impossible because of the unique nature of the space, holding a reception for student art-scholarship is very compelling and easy to execute in a DH classroom. In inviting audience members into the classroom, we underscore the importance of having the intellectual mixtapes be a part of a large-networked conversation, rather than a unidirectional discourse. It is imperative that this work be viewed through the lense of community, and not just as an artifact of the academic system. As Brandon Locke notes, “Media and information literacies and multimodal and digital writing skills are essential for effective communication and civic engagement now and in the future, and liberal arts courses must engage with them” [Locke]. Any DH classroom could host a reception of any kind as part of the midterm or final. In the case of the intellectual mixtape, community members could gather together to eat food, explore the student work that has been created, and discuss their own reactions to the student work with each other, the teacher, or the students themselves.

Conclusion

The intellectual mixtape assignment is an approach to teaching in liberal arts and digital humanities that promotes multimodal scholarship and artistic creation. The seven-part assignment teaches students skills such as audio-editing, process writing, and performing. Though students are asked to make their mixtape tracks in conversation with the audios they sample, students are also asked to be authorities on their own tracks. The assignment thus emphasizes the importance of students developing their own voice and developing their own sound in order to develop flow. The conversations they create through these interwoven audios constitute internally persuasive discourse and promote empathic engagement both in the intellectual mixtape assignment and in the *Sound of Space* performance. The mixtapes and performance were Afrofuturist appropriations and improvisational conversations in which, without being prompted, all students took on other identities in order to express themselves. While this approach to learning and scholarship is primed for delivery in liberal arts and digital humanities courses, Copyright Law in the United States often inhibits legal deployment of the intellectual mixtape assignment. It is especially dubious when working with contemporary works, like those found in the body of Afrofuturist work. Even so, the intellectual mixtape is a viable assignment that shifts textual and cultural analysis from top-down approaches that privilege the authority of assigned texts to student-centered sampling and mixing that encourages flow and expression of their individual world views.

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