“Wanted: Some Black Long Distance [Writers]”: Blackboard Flava-Flavin and other AfroDigital experiences in the classroom

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Abstract

This essay examines how students of African descent at a predominantly black college on the East Coast digitally perform their ethnic identities and rhetorics in a freshman composition course. The essay begins by showing how multiple uses of signifying frame students’ Blackboard discussions where they use a type of trickster motif to enact their agreements, disagreements, challenges, and questions, very much akin to Flava Flav’s initial cultural role as part of the Rap/activist group, Public Enemy. Students’ online writing groups are then examined by focusing on one particular group, the “Black Long Distance Writers,” whose title signifies and signals the work of the African American writer and activist, John Oliver Killens, most notably, his seminal 1973 essay, “Wanted: Some Black Long Distance Runners.” The understandings of these “Black Long Distance Writers” bear the most powerful definition of literacy and computer-based writing instruction because their framework is not contingent upon making digitally divided minorities more technologically advanced and better at one type of English, its culture of power, or its academic discourses. Instead, these students experience rhetoric and writing as a way to alter the ways that knowledge is constructed for them and about them, “revocabularizing” the academy and its technologies. Such freshman writers are re-envisioned in this kind of cyberspace as constructors of and co-participants in black intellectual and rhetorical traditions...now AfroDigitized. © 2007 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

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In the 1973 essay, “Wanted: Some Black Long Distance Runners,” novelist, essayist, and activist John Oliver Killens (JOK) linked the struggle for racial equality to a marathon race. According to Killens, if you watch the Olympics, you see black folk leaving everybody in the dust when it comes to running sprints since they got “the fastest getaway known to mankind” (p. 460) Their long-distance game is altogether something else (well, at least, at the time that Killens wrote this piece). According to him, it was “that lasting power,” all the pacing and
stamina, that black runners really needed to be advancing, not the sprinting. Killens broke all of this down in the first paragraph of the essay, making you think that maybe this is an essay about racial inequity and the lack of representation across various sports fields. But then the essay turns: When you reach the second paragraph, you realize that this ain’t an essay about sports or black athletes at all. The long-distance race is actually black people’s struggle for liberation, but, unfortunately, we have only been sprinters so far. Killens went on to historicize key elements of 1950’s–1960’s Social Justice Movements (Montgomery Bus Boycott, Sit-ins, Freedom Riders, voter registration campaigns, etc.), all of which he sees as successful and powerful sprint races, in order to demarcate what it would mean to move from these sprints into distance racing. This distance metaphor has inspired this essay in many ways, mainly because it was re-mixed by a group of first-year composition (FYC) students at a small college with a population of students who are primarily of African descent in a large city-center. The students in my FYC courses that used Blackboard (Bb) defined themselves in relation to their own computer-mediated communication using JOK’s metaphor: the “Black Long Distance Writers.”

The name, “Black Long Distance Writers,” plays on notions of distance learning and other contemporary ways that technology is being used in colleges today. At the same time, the students who coined this title are also engaging the work of Killens by making the same kind of sprint-versus-distance political argument about their writing. They thus position themselves inside of a (digital) long-distance struggle for liberation and see their writings and experiences as part of a larger liberation movement. Just as they borrow Killens’s words to name their world, they borrow the boldness of his rhetorical flava. Going the distance as a “Black Long Distance Writer” is not just about what you have to say but how you say it. In naming themselves “Black Long Distance Writers,” these students are marking a distinct political vision for themselves as technologists of African descent.¹ They use the rhetorics of JOK as a vehicle; since all of the students in the class have read this essay, they are borrowing on a distinct cultural motif for this community (where Killens also once lived and taught). And as you will see, the vernacular² absolutely shapes students’ communications.

¹ Gilyard’s (2003) Liberation Memories: The Rhetorics and Poetics of John Oliver Killens focused exclusively on the works of Killens and offered a heuristic of JOK’s body of writing that I would like to borrow in order to situate the computer-mediated communication (CMC) of my students. Gilyard argued that a complex investigation of Killens’s work must branch out into three areas: (1) vision—Killens’s arguments about his view of world; (2) vehicle—the rhetorical devices that Killens uses to structure and articulate his arguments (the Black sermon, folktales, Dubois’s philosophies, signifying, the images of Malcolm X, literacy-as-freedom motifs); and (3) vernacular—“the linguistic, musical, folkloric, and religious practices of common African Americans” (pp. 3–4). It is worth looking closely at these three modes—vision, vehicle, and vernacular – since they can unfold most critically what students are attempting to negotiate when they write in/for/with Afro-digital spaces. Surely, FYC students may not be getting down like JOK on the writing tip (or any of the writers in this journal, including myself). Most college freshmen simply have not had the kind of longevity and discipline as a multi-genred writing professional and activist like JOK. But the college freshmen at the center of this essay are not divorced from JOK’s work either. Since they are co-meaning-makers in the vernacular cultures JOK spoke/wrote/thought through, these students’ worlds can be written into existence using similar modes that Gilyard has written JOK’s political-languaging systems into existence also.

² I realize that vernacular is a highly contested term and casts the variety that my students use as a marginalized dialect rather than as a language. I hope, however, that I am using vernacular in a different way here. When I speak of vernacularity, I mean “the discursive turning away from the accepted, dominant intellectual modality and
In taking my inspiration from these “Black Long Distance Writers,” I hope to co-construct with them a “different narrative of online communication that [will] take into account [their] racially marked acts of representing” (Knadler, 2001, p. 238). While I will look more closely at how one particular group of students understood and defined their distinctly racialized phenomenon of going the distance in their online writing group, I am also attempting to go the distance as I enter what are often double-troubled conversations: (1) the politics of technology, race, identity, and social/economic stratification and (2) the politics of my students’ writing and my own vernacular teaching in the classroom. My discussion of all of that is broken into three parts—two threads that hopefully piece back together into one whole and a conclusion. In thread one, “Pan-African spaces: A technology and rhetoric,” I attempt to ground aspects of the larger university and its institutional policies/practices while also showing that these are not the only actors in the Pan-African drama that unfolds students’ unique linguistic and rhetorical possibilities. Thread two, “You Can Only Run as Far As Your Legs Will Let You Go’: Get up and get down with Blackboard Flava-Flavin and Black Long Distance Writers, examines students’ discourses more closely with a metaphor—Blackboard Flava-Flavin.” Blackboard, with all of its restrictions and limited pre-packaged qualities, was used over the course of 2 years to provide a forum for computer-mediated communication (CMC) for students. In that confined space, students busted it out with multiple uses of a type of trickster motif to enact their agreements, disagreements, challenges, and questions, very much akin to Flava Flav’s role in the Rap/activist group, Public Enemy. With this metaphor, I hope to bring light to the ways in which rhetorical practices of signifying constitute a cultur/digitally unique type of spontaneous presence. I return again to the Black Long Distance Writers to look more closely at how they really throw down in their online writing groups (the way in which the group function of Bb was used in the course). Here, we will see how students come to define their language as coterminous with their content. After this thread, I leave the forum and come back for some face-to-face with you, or maybe gettin in your face. Thus, my final section is called “F2F: What you gon do about it?” Here I let loose on what we often think of as conventional, acceptable modes of “academic discourses” that must necessarily be ruptured to travel the kinds of Black (digital and non-digital) distances this essay is titled after.

Because of the continued ways literacy instruction and Ebonics have been put on public display in the U.S., from the Ann Arbor “Black English Case” of 1979 to the Oakland Ebonics Movement of 1996, the language of students of African descent in the U.S. serves as a kind of litmus test for how we understand and engage the multidialectal and multilingual nature of American classrooms. Thus, the treatment of Ebonics is not limited solely to its speakers but is integral for those who think critically about a multilingual world and how we rupture a globalized white middle-class location as the only see-able vantage point on the horizon of language possibilities in classrooms. There is often a type of binary thinking: Standard English is one side, and anything non-English and/or non-standard is on the other side, and you simply just code-switch back and forth between the two sides. A type of tug-of-war vocabulary and the adoption of a new positioning and idiomatic language. It also signals a turning toward, not in a nostalgic but in a considered and deliberate fashion, and (re)connection to an originary—but not necessarily umbilical—community” so that a scholar is ideologically and linguistically remade (Farred, 2003, p. 11).
game is played where seemingly different registers are easily separable on opposite sides of the rope, never moving in the same direction, always traveling opposite. In contrast, the understandings of “Black Long Distance Writers” bear the most powerful definition of digital literacies because their framework is not contingent upon making digitally divided minorities more technologically advanced and better at one type of English, its culture of power, or its academic discourse. Instead, students experience rhetoric and writing as a way to alter the ways that knowledge is constructed for them and about them in the academy, transmuting old conditions by rhetorically creating new demands. Just as Houston Baker (1993) suggested in defining African American students as the migrants to the Western university, they refuse to be good, compliant citizens awaiting the imprint of a good, bourgeois liberal humanism and, instead, “revocabulary the academy” and its technologies. When all is said and done, CMC in FYC can be another space where dominant paradigms for what counts as academic writing and, therefore, thought can be ruptured. It is a space where critical literacy and vernacular traditions can meet and shape students’ sense of themselves as writers, thinkers, and social agents. Freshman writers are re-envisioned in this kind of cyberspace as constructors of and co-participants in black intellectual and rhetorical traditions . . . now AfroDigitized.

1. Pan-African spaces: A technology and rhetoric

Since schooling itself has maintained racial hierarchies—from the books, to the pedagogies, to the facilities, to the policies—technology in these spaces comes similarly loaded where old inequalities simply get mapped onto and reinforce new ones (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Rathbun & West, 2003; Selfe & Selfe, 1994; Swenson, Rozema, Young, McGrail, & Whitin, 2005). Although various statistics reveal that 98% of U.S. public schools actually have computers, the nature of how students of African descent, especially those concentrated in large city-centers, interact with computers in schools is very different from their suburban and urban white peers (MacGillis, 2004; McAdoo, 1994; Sheingold, Martin, & Endreweit, 1987). As Jonathon Sterne (2000) argued “the politics of access are not simply a matter of getting more people online. It is also a matter of how, when, and on what terms people are coming online, and what they discover upon arrival” (p. 209). Connectivity, the nature of technological pedagogies, and racist schooling all intersect to reproduce the savage inequalities in which white wealthy schools use computers for communication and collaborative learning projects as preparation for future professional and managerial roles; poorer schools of color get computerized keyboarding and drill lessons in preparation for taking orders in the lowest rungs of the service industry (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1993; Cuban, 2001; Gomez, 1991; Monroe, 2004; Moran & Selfe, 1999; Warshauer, 1999).

It would be more romantic than realistic to suggest that these structural issues are not serious barriers. Though my college is not considered one of the official Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU); rather, it is part of larger system of 2-year and 4-year city colleges and was created based on the demands of the black community in the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements, and the structural inequalities that the university faces with regard to technology look very much like its historic sister-institutions that Teresa Redd (2003) described in “Tryin To Make a Dolla Outa Fifteen Cent”: 
• Students are largely working students who have not had the at-home computer technologies that their white, wealthier peers have (pp. 363–364).
• This college, is a commuter college so there is no need for dorms with wireless connections, but there are few wireless connections in buildings either; other such amenities are scarce like high-speed networks in libraries; walk-up computer stations are relatively new (and still very sparse) (p. 361).
• Composition classes have little or no access to computers (pp. 360, 361–362); in fact, in two years, I was able to use a computer class/room only four times.
• Frequent use of reliable faculty email accounts is still relatively new (p. 360); my .edu account never worked and the computer in my office was so old and slow (when I finally received one) that I rarely used it for even simple word processing needs (p. 362).

Yet, at one and the same time, it would be equally problematic to look at these structural issues and assume that my students and communities of color are passive victims and marginalized bystanders who are invisibilized by technological advancements. As Ron Eglash (2004) reminded us,

> [G]roups outside the centers of scientific power persistently defy the notion that they are merely passive recipients of technological products and scientific knowledge. Rather, there are many instances in which they reinvent these products and rethink their knowledge systems, often in ways that embody critique, resistance, or outright revolt. (2004, p. vii)

Those revolts are as central to the uses of technology in classrooms as are its modes of domination. Casting communities of color as technologically passive helps to continue what Alondra Nelson, Thuy Tu, and Alicia Hines (2001) called “a strange silence around how the experiences of people of color might recast technocultural theory . . . . [I]f people of color are seen only as victims, then there is very little reason to entrust them with the tools of the future” (p. 3). And so, the myth must necessarily reproduce the racist reality. The struggle then is to rigorously engage and critique structural racism as it is reintroduced and reinforced by technologies without reverting to a “binary logic that insists that race and technology are always at odds with each other” (Nelson, Tu, & Hines, 2001, p. 3). Rayvon Fouche’s (2003) notions of “black vernacular technological creativity” also allow us to shift the focus away from the objects of technology and to the people and communities rooted in black cultural and aesthetic priorities that redefine technologies’ use, functions, and design. Though they were allowed to construct components of systems but not the systems themselves, their needs, desires, and priorities redefined the practices and knowledges, subverting dominant meanings of those systems.

To give more of a sense of the college/community that shapes the context of my students’ knowledges, here are some things you need to know:

3 All of this information is based on statistics gathered by the college’s office of institutional assessment, planning, and accountability collected in 2004.

• Total student enrollment is about 5000 with a little more than half of the students being full time.
• More than three quarters live in the city/borough in which the college is located.
• At least three quarters of the students are female.
• The average age of the students is 30 with about 20% being under 21 years of age.
• More than 90% of the students are of African descent with the majority representing families hailing from the Caribbean.
• Of non-U.S. born students, Jamaican is the largest group, followed by Trinidadian, Haitian, Guyanese, other Caribbean/Latin American, and African (in that order).

The histories of im/migration to this particular city, alongside the history of this college’s migration into the black community in which it is housed physically and spiritually, represent a unique kind of geographic space. It is a communicative situation where the genres and the media of its peoples do a unique kind of cultural and ideological work with a Pan-African focus. Cyberspace, thus, becomes part of what critical cartographers/geographers like Katherine McKittrick (2006) called the “ongoing geographic struggle” for black Atlantic subjects in the Western world (pp. xvii, xxi). McKittrick’s work tells us that geographies are always infused with distinct yet multiple knowledges and language systems. Since space and place are always much more than just vessels that contain peoples and their social relations, geographies represent connective and connected sites of struggle. My students have a different role in these unresolved and unfinished geographic stories: to rewrite them.

In claiming a Pan-African locus, I am using a much contested term and history, but it is precisely the contested, ever-changing, and always-moving nature of this terrain that I am marking as a rhetoric. Pan-African history is, of course, 200+ years old and encompasses studies related to African cultural resistance; the interdisciplinary aspects of African Diaspora research that looks at continuities and discontinuities concerning the history of African descended peoples throughout the world; a body of black nationalists such as Malcolm X, John Henrik Clarke, Marcus Garvey, Amy Jacques Garvey (and Amy Ashwood Garvey), Claudia Jones, Anna Julia Cooper, Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, Frantz Fanon, George Padmore, Walter Rodney, C.L.R. James, Paul Robeson, and W. Alphaeus Hunton; black activist moments crucially defined by early Pan-African conferences in 1900 (London), 1919 (Paris), 1921 (London, Brussels, Paris), 1923 (London), and 1927 (New York) (Adi & Sherwood, 2003; Clarke, 1992; Drake, 1963; Fierce, 1993; Hurley, Larrier, & McLaren, 1998; Lemelle & Kelley, 1994; Walters, 1997; Watson, 2000). There has never been a universally accepted definition of what Pan-Africanism stands for and entails. For the purposes of the unique spaces in which my students think, talk, read, and write, I will limit the definition here as young women and men of African descent whose lives and work become concerned, in some way, with the social and political emancipation of African peoples across the African Diaspora whose histories from the transatlantic slave trade to the im/migrations today are interconnected.

A Pan-African classroom assumes that its students will, by the very nature of the society in which they live, have conflicting and contradictory politics. They need to be politically challenged, engaged, and prodded in so much as they have also inherited “traditions of accommodation deriving from legacies of domination” (Canagarajah, 1997, p. 173). It cannot be assumed that they will automatically come to class as mini-Malcolm X’s. Though I occasionally introduce students to Pan-African political movements through assigned readings since they cannot innately know specific events and people, I do not explicitly give chalkboard/blackboard lectures on the history and definition of Pan-Africanism in all of my courses.
all of the time. This is not the only way that Pan-Africanism can ground a politics of curri-

culum and instruction. I believe these students co-construct contemporary Pan-African meanings

and rhetorics given the nature of who attends this institution. Students’ digital rhetorics are

profundely shaped by the fact that they are writing for each other—an audience of African
descent that spans the African Diaspora. Bb embodies such a space since it adds to students’

focus on their relationships with one another. Like what Redd (1995) showed in her essay,

“Untapped Resources: ‘Styling’ in Black Students’ Writing for Black Audiences,” students’
texts are fundamentally reshaped in content and style when they are asked to write for Black

audiences.

2. “You Can Only Run as Far As Your Legs Will Let You Go”: Get up and get down

with Blackboard Flava-Flavin and Black Long Distance Writers

Students use the technology of Bb discussion forums for their very own goals, linked to their

own histories around race and their social and political locations as black students at a black
college. In one particular semester when students read the essay by Killens (1992), “Wanted:
Some Black Long Distance Runners,” their very first three posts in the forum dedicated to the
essay enacted a key element of their online rhetorics: the use of extensive, running metaphors
to organize their arguments, name their threads to grab attention, and express disagreement.
Students could visit this forum and start their own threads, visit other forums dedicated to
other texts of the course or key arguments that emerged in their F2F small group and whole
class discussions (or suggest forums they want me to create). In the first thread dedicated to
“the Wanted” essay, Lori opens by saying she’s just not feeling JOK in this essay. JOK has
simply gone too far with this sprinter metaphor because sprinters can be relay runners in longer
distance races who pass the baton to the next person. She named her thread, “You Can Only
Run as Far As Your Legs Will Let You Go,” and she and her peers worked that metaphor down
to the bone as a central part of the rhetorical work that they did in that forum. Here is how Lori
opens it up:

This essay of JOK was not a favorite of mines. I feel he was only giving tribute to W.E.B.
DuBois. This is not to say that DuBois doesn’t deserve it but in the same breath he was
disrespecting those black people in the fifties and sixties. In my opinion any contribution to
the struggle be it big or small should be applauded not criticized. In this essay JOK discusses
what he calls a faithless cynical brother. He tells the reader of the comment this man made
which was “maybe that’s the only place it’ll ever happen.” This man was saying that television
was the only place you will see revolution. To a certain extent, I agree with this so called
cynical brother. The more you see black people on television for good and bad things the
more we are being recognized as being a major part of the U.S of A. As far as the need for
long distance runners, there will always be a need for long distance runners. I have faith that
the sprinters of the past and present will inspire long distance runners of tomorrow but for
today we need to appreciate the gutsy sprinters of the past. Furthermore as human beings
we need to have compassion for those whose legs get tired with the distance of the race.
After all that’s what relay races have taught us: that when you get tired, pass it on to the next
runner.
As a teacher, I admit to being immediately struck by the first sentence! I am tickled that Lori says this essay by JOK was not a favorite of hers as if she really knows his stuff when, in fact, it is only the 3rd week of class and she had never heard of the man before. For me, this is crucial, regardless of how immature others might claim it to be because Lori is claiming a body of work and knowledge for herself and her own position and perspective within it. She can summarize JOK, overtake his metaphors, quote him, position herself in a larger body of his essay-work, and draw her peers into her forum all in one post. The next post disagrees with her somewhat, takes/quotes her words, and then goes into the old and new metaphors:

Actually, W.E.B was just highlighted as being a prime example of a great long distance runner and that his attitude should be more common among black people. I think JOK would want our “compassion” for the people whose “legs get tired” to motivate them to get back into the race and stay in it for as long as possible.

Lori won’t leave it like that though. The next post shifts the thread into whether or not their generation, 20–25 year olds, can really criticize the sprinters of the Civil Rights era:

I get what you are saying about the long haul but I haven’t had half the struggle as the people before me and neither have you. So all I’m saying is appreciate all the runners... sprinters and long distance.

By this time, more students are in on the conversation. Another student changes the subject line to “Understanding the Sport” and most posts start to look at what revolution and liberation for the distance looks like. The subject line changes again to “yall are just brainwashed” and introduces a turn with the following three posts, in succession:

You know this whole thing about doing something to help our people get ahead n run a race, short race, long race, pass dis, pass dat, run some mo, keep ya culture, say it loud, I’m black and I’m proud, all that gettin tired. My legs ain’t tired but yall are and gettin way too happy on JOK. He just wants to brainwash you.

Feelin ya. Now all sudden black people wan be mighty, mighty an conscience.

We are digesting literature that promotes black supremacy. Shoudn’t he be empowering us steaday steady brainwashing us?

These kinds of turns/disagreements always get the crowd going, and before you know it, the posts keep on coming. The first direct hit to these three posts is:

i wouldn’t say dat JOK is brainwashin nebody here. him jus lay he cards on da table. he is givin us a view of what was n what we as a people need 2 do elevate ourselves out of da slump we r in so we won’t have a white mentality covered w/ a black skin. like da man a say “my fight is not 2 b a white man in a black skin.” de man jus wan yu fe andastan sa yuh fe bi intelligent and yuh fe bi proud af hu yuh r.

After this post, everyone starts changing the subject line with metaphors (and corresponding posts) going up against the thee contrarian posts: “This Ain’t No Game, You Just Played Yourself;” “She Tink She Betta Den We;” “Black Done Turned Tuh Coloured;” “Denial;” “The Blacker Da Berry Da Sweeter The Juice . . . U Just Sour.” The titles in the subject lines offer a process for “gaining the floor” in these contexts (Colomb & Simutis, 1996, p. 208). Students express disagreement, drive a point home, and create a provocative title that will
capture people’s attention. That students use the vernacular and not something we see as “standard” to express their most heated disagreements about racial politics is interesting. The fact that students know how and when to do this is much deeper than saying that such students embrace their middle-class-ness by “speaking proper” since it “is as much as part of who they are as ‘getting down’” (Knadler, 2001, p. 245). The issue is when and where they do what, why, and how. The notion of vernacular is often used to signify the spoken language of the “folk,” the working class masses. When I speak of vernacular and the black masses, I wish to connote and denote systems of knowledge that Sylvia Wynter (2006) has defined as inherent to the “people who are logically excluded, as ‘the waste products of all modern political practice’ . . . with their expulsion being indispensable to the reproduction of our present order” (p. 120). In this context, the vernacular does alternative political work connected to what McKittrick (2006) described as “contemporary black expressive cultures” creating “new and contestatory geographic acts” that “communicate the livability of the world through mapping” new possibilities for its terrain (p. 138). Depending upon its use, it can change the normalcy of the hegemonic middle class as a seeable and critical intervention into the “normal,” and in the case of these Bb posts, participate in an important struggle to define what black liberation is, for the past and present.

This thread around JOK’s “wanted” essay, a blueprint for what happens in almost every thread in each forum, marked the beginning of what I started calling Blackboard Flava Flaving. This signifying back and forth, the long running metaphors that shape entire threads, and then the tricksters who keep popping up, as bad as they wanna be, reminded me of Flava Flav from Public Enemy back in the day (not his current antics to find minstrel-love on cable television). I kept imagining the P.E. video about “911” where Flava Flav’s head would keep popping into the video screen sayin stuff like “911 is jokin yo town.” The caustic humor alongside his tellin-it-like-it-is moves the song and the message forward. The antics are meant to be more than just merely funny because 911 does not serve black communities, and he tricksters his way through the song to get you to understand that. That image made me joke with my students that they use blackboard to Flava-Flav (which now functions as a verb for me) and my vocal admission/signifying on them seemed to free them up to do even more of it. Surely, we have seen how students use joking to scaffold their interactions with one another in CMC (Holcomb, 1997). Yet, for these students, trickstering is more than just joking; it is a rhetoric that does the work of clarifying their political and cultural visions.

After students are introduced to Bb, I organize students into online writing groups where they file exchange various drafts of papers and other projects they are working on. The first, F2F meeting of students’ writing groups involves giving themselves a name. This started out as another one of my really corny ideas that would simply make it easier for the groups to spot themselves on the group list on the Bb. Yet, again, they worked their writing group names down to the bone (they chose the members of their writing groups, which consist of anywhere from 3 to 5 students). There have been writing groups with names like Toussaint Remembered, No Limit, Caribbean Scholars, B.W.A., Independent Black Women, Da Truth, Black Dynasty, Scholars on the Move. One group of five students called themselves the Furious Five, and since they considered me Old and Old Skool, I was Grandmaster Flash. Another group called themselves Ghostwriters, which I suggested might concern other writing teachers in the department. With a quick comeback, they told the class that this title simply meant that
their ideas were so potent that everyone bites them and so, in effect, they are the ghostwriters of everyone’s paper even if they do not manually write them. That got a lot of hisses in the room, so another group, also with a quick comeback, named themselves Insomnia because (1) they have developed an inability to sleep because they have so much to do for school, work, and family, and (2) the ghostwriters and their ideas are so tiring that the only thing those ideas do is put them to sleep.

In these Bb groups, only the group members are allowed to enter the forums. Each genre/assignment has its own forum. Students create their own individual threads where they have an online discussion with their peers about each other’s papers. I ask that they discuss each of their texts in the threads and forums rather than using the spot-editing functions of Bb file exchanges that tend to veer students away from larger global discussions of one another’s work. The chance for taking over someone else’s text, especially at the grammatical and sentence level, is much too likely (Forbes, 1996). For this reason, students have their own thread where they can talk to their peers and then go back and see their own archives for their individual papers. Responding to one another’s drafts is not meant to be a neutral activity on what should be added and omitted to make an essay sound better. Instead, response requires a commitment to the work that the writer is doing, to the kinds of vernaculars and rhetorics that the writer is using to carry his/her vision.

In the semester where the pass-the-baton metaphor emerged on the class Bb, the name, Black Long Distance Writers, was coined for a writing group, signifying on the folks who they disagreed with in that thread and on Killens’s essay title, “Black Long Distance Runners.” With this title, they publicly exclaim to their peers that they are the kind of writers who work and write for social change, going the long haul, going that distance that JOK talked about. You only need a few posts from that group discussion board to see how they flow. At onset, one of the Black Long Distance Writers before posting her draft discussed her own anxieties about writing, anxieties that she saw as connected to the mania of her previous teachers over her language and correctness. The replies to her got started like this:

First of all let me set it straight for u once and for all, writing or doing anything else in life just requires thinking and faith. If u put it in your mind that u not that good or u have a weakness and u not working on it 2 change that, u setting up yourself 4 failure. Even when u no in your heart that u not good, put your mind thinking that u are great. I don’t even know why you say u are not a good writer when I personally know that u r regarding the 2 works I read. If u sucked, I would’ve told u but in a nicer way. But there’s no limit to perfection, we gotta always work on it, like JOK did.

The student starts a discussion about her anxiety of writing and, in response, her peers use JOK’s words and wisdom to peek in and out of these posts.

When the Black Long Distance Writers begin work on early drafts, comments to one another are very general, typical of this post:

I like your essay. It’s cool. But I think u need 2 emphasize more on your own behalf. Let us hear a little more on how you feel about the situation. U don’t need 2 change anything just add a little more flavor from your heart and set up a hot introduction and your essay will B real tasty. U did the first part/thread of the job by giving the authors’ views and they feelings towards African American people, now its your turn to rock the boat. SO ROCK IT, LET
YOUR VOICE BE HEARD AND YOUR PEN FLOW UNTIL YOU GOT SOMETHING TO SHOW.

In subsequent revisions, Black Long Distance Writers end up having in-depth discussions about the issues they are examining, doing the important intellectual work that it takes to develop the ideas of their papers. Here is a typical post that results in a series of more, long posts about their own educational experiences, all of which later became “data” for one of the Black Long Distance Writer’s paper:

Yup, not having a degree effects everyone especially Blacks. U need 2 do some research so if u say something u can be sure 2 back it up. You said: As a child growing up in the public school system I found it hard to learn everything because of the teachers’ teaching habit. I’m not saying that the teachers were not doing their job, but they could have made our learning experience better. I think U should show, don’t tell. Why did U find it so hard? What did the teachers do 2 make it hard and how? Also you are talking about African American students so throw that in your essay. IF YOU GOING TO HIT ME WITH TEACHERS HAVING BAD HABITS, HIT ME HARD. I would suggest u think about issues like the teachers don’t teach black children certain things because they think or believe the black children are not ready or not 2 clever and they brainwash us Afrikans about white history such as Christopher Columwhat. There’s a lot of stuff I can talk about, U was born in the U.S. so U know and I’m sure U experience these issues. I like the way U gave a synopsis of your education that was cool. U got it sister.

These Black Long Distance Writers also stay committed to one another throughout the process, on up into the editing stages:

I know we as students get tight at time with school work but we need 2 try 2 edit our papers before we hand them in. I need to get this paper edited way beforehand so that way my paper could be CRISP like Kelloggs Cereal. . . can we want meet to edit?

The metaphors that they use to understand one another and to define their uses for technology are interchangeable. Such metaphors do their own technological work:

Power of creating new metaphors and idioms in which to express ourselves technologically . . . the metaphors we use to structure our understandings of technological systems are fundamentally productive: they change who can interact with a given technology, and how. By paying attention to technological appropriation in this realm [of black long distance writers] . . . we may be able to design sociotechnical systems that are more flexible, egalitarian, and inclusive. (Eubanks, 2004, p. 155)

My re-interpretation here of the stories that are told about working class FYC students of African descent are intended to engage what Virginia Eubanks (2004) called “technological appropriation” (p. 158).

Bb, with it pre-packaged capabilities, really lacks room for real innovation and invention in what my students can do with technology. Imagine this: an interactive website, a DVD/CD-Rom/FYC curriculum, or a student-run blog for HBCU students that the Black Long Distance Writers created that defines, uses, and theorizes the definitions of and uses for their Pan-African visions, rhetorics, and vernaculars. I had neither the technological skills nor the resources to offer them such possibilities, and while this is certainly tragic, it is just as tragic to miss the way
that such capabilities and imaginations still refigured something as restrictive as Blackboard in the classroom.

Between the beepers, phones, handhelds, text-messaging, my students are all familiar enough with technology, but as Nick Carbone (2001) warned in Kairos, my students run the risk they

will not be deep users, [that] they’ll be more used than using. So many will be destined to lives on the ‘lectronic plantation, being beeped at will, always on, work always attached to them, in lower paying positions, ensnared more than empowered by the always already there wireless net. (n.p.)

As for now, I continue to hope and believe that when students craft their visions, rhetorics, and vernaculars for Pan-African audiences, they can begin to more fully realize a way to situate themselves inside of technology so that they are the ones using it for what they want rather than it using them.

3. F2F: What you gon do about it?

In Literacy in the New Media Age, Gunther Kress (2003) looked at the past, in particular the printing press, to argue that old resources colonize new technologies. Although the printing press replaced the medieval scribe, the forms of writing of the scribe still dominated the new technology. As such, in regard to new technologies today, Kress asked the question: “And what shapes are we carrying forward, unbeknown to ourselves?” (2003, p. 83). People like Stuart Selber (2004) addressed questions such as this in English classrooms when he said there is

[a] tendency to rely too heavily on one-way literacy models as a foundation for computer initiatives. That is, many teachers of writing and communication simply transfer wholesale to the screen their existing assumptions, goals, and practices. (p. 23)

There is nothing intrinsic to Blackboard (and other such institutional technology packages) that will challenge dominant concepts of my students’ subjectivities, rhetoric, and writing. In most cases, my students will go on to use Bb in their other classes as the most efficient way for them to take multiple-choice quizzes and tests. Meanwhile, it is regarded by administrators as a mechanism to humanize large (or just boring) lecture halls and increase retention by “improving” students’ interaction with faculty in a way that does not require institutions to actually commit to hiring more full-time, tenured faculty. Thus, Bb fulfills the functions of our “current myths” in higher education that computers make everything better: Distance education can “increase enrollments and workloads but not faculty positions” (Selber, 2004, p. 5); endless intranet and email exchanges manage extensive communication and yet “unrealistically inflate communication expectations” (Selber, 2004, p. 5); repetitive and routine classrooms become automated without changing traditional teacher–student hierarchies and monologic-teacher spaces so that students can download their lecture notes, run tutorials, perform their same essay/quiz/skills-tasks over a network that exchanges the work and grading faster (Selber, 2004, p. 9).
Since CMC does not necessarily rupture teacher-dominated and/or traditional pedagogies, new technologies can be used to simply replace busy-work (Boling, 2003; Gruber, 1995). K-12 researchers have looked at the ways in which educators have still not moved beyond such mechanistic uses of computer (Bruce & Hogan, 1998; Jacobsen & Lock, 2004). In relation, CMC beyond K-12 in the form of Bb is often used to simply promote the same grammar-based current-traditionalism that infects much of the writing instruction at schools that serve working-class students of color. Bourgeois-uplift narratives work in concert to choke out possibilities for critical literacy: Give students standardized “academic discourse” in FYC, and they will do well in their other classes and go on to be good bachelor-degreed workers; and now, give students computer practice in all of that, and they will do well in their other classes and go on to be good bachelor-degreed, technologically oriented workers.

Simply ignoring technology because of these colonizing forces is also not an option. Selber’s post-critical stance makes sense of packages like Bb though this stance clearly advocates much more sophisticated technology-design opportunities than the limited uses of Bb in my classrooms. The point is that Selber urged us and our students to be co-critiquing these technologies and their uses in higher education while also being able to use them:

[C]ritique alone will not prepare students to involve themselves fully, actively, successfully in technological contexts. Critique is certainly one crucial aspect of any computer literacy program, for it encourages a cultural awareness of power structures. But students must also be able to use computers effectively as well as part/threadicipate in the construction and reconstruction of technological systems. (2004, p. 7)

Uses of technology for students of African descent is simply the newest “ambiguous adventure” of their schooling since computers are more than just tools for writing but are artifacts that shape and are shaped by our social world (Hawisher & Selfe, 1999). In Chiekh Kane’s (1963) novel, *Ambiguous Adventure*, the Royal Lady has seen that it is the school and its post-religious paradigms of truth, ethics, and learning that have most effectively colonized Africa. Yet, at the same time, she sees that the coming of the West represents a fundamental change in the social order that will have to be battled head-on. Her children have no choice but to be part of that schooling and fight it with the realization that this will be the most “ambiguous adventure” of all. Writers like Ngugi Wa Thiong’o (1986) and Walter Rodney (1982) have argued similarly, showing that school’s “ambiguous adventure” for its most subordinated students never completely colonize knowledge, and, instead, school gets un-mapped. When we think about writing, traditional territories of power can also be un-mapped.

In the most utilitarian sense, CMC increases students’ possibilities for achieving what we see as traditional academic discourses:

When students write academic discourse, the problem is not that their natural, centrifugal tendency toward dialogue is constrained by the centripetal forces of unity, authority, and truth in academic genres. The problem is that they are too often denied the resources needed to achieve the kind of dialogue that makes academic discourse what it is. They have neither the interest nor the time and opportunity for the extended give and take of professional scholars...[and] their conversation is only with their teachers, who too often hide from them the contingent, contested nature of what they are learning. (Colomb & Simutis, 1996, p. 220)
However, most importantly, even something as compromised as Bb can create a space where dominant paradigms for what counts as academic writing and content can be ruptured to open up the intersection of critical literacy and black vernacular traditions that can lead to students’ sense of themselves as writers, thinkers, and social agents. This ultimately means that traditional genres, say for instance the freshman essay and the research paper where students display their reading and research skills (Trupe, 2002), are questioned, even explicitly by the students themselves, like the Black Long Distance Writers who started their online group decolonizing the metaphors on their speech, vernacular, and writing as their first self-designed assignment. Just like the students in Suresh Canagarajah’s (1997) “Safe Houses in the Contact Zones,” my students’ Bb communications interrogated a range of discursive issues where they themselves contrasted and decided upon rhetorical and linguistic conventions; they argued about the use and appropriateness of “home languages” and how/why the academy especially shuns their homes; they interrogated each other’s ideologies as well as the authors they were reading; and sometimes, they attempted, come hell or high water, to get their brothers and sisters to unite, once and for all, against “the man”—in the academy and everywhere outside—with all that their ancestral legacies bestowed upon them. As Canagarajah reminded us, this kind of work gives students an appreciation of their own discourses while also allowing them a critical space to develop them. There is no assumption that because students can “code-switch” with family and friends that this automatically transfers to powerful writing in that Spoken Word. That would be akin to assuming that every sister from the South in the United States can write like Zora Neale Hurston. That kind of vernacular presence in writing comes from more than merely her or her teachers’ appreciation and validation of her language as rules-based or, even, appropriate “in some places;” it comes from extensive discursive use, in speech and in print. Such writing works to “ensure the survival and growth of alternate forms of knowledge that can challenge and redefine dominant discourses in the academy” (Canagarajah, 1997, p. 191).

Arguing for and actually doing the do is no small battle. There are few who would have valued mine and my students’ vernacularized writings. Many study, assign, and publicly showcase quite extensively the kinds of literatures and writers of African descent, present and past, who explore such contestatory discourses and linguistic varieties. Yet, many of the same simultaneously shun a pedagogy and politics that centers such writing as an abdication of the responsibility to teach traditional academic discourse (supposedly best captured by the 5-paragraph essay, the prevailing form in my department on up into advanced composition courses). In 5 years, at every forum related to composition—from NCTE events to smaller theme-based conferences—I have presented such examples of student work. In each case, an audience member has interrogated me about my students’ understandings of the “culture of power” and “knowing-how-to-write-THE-essay,” from the Old Skool heads, who know mo betta but don’t always do mo betta, to the newjacks learning how to swing as post-modern traditionalists. As a response to all this here, I again point to Canagarajah’s argument: These writing sites are not passive places to provide some kind of psychological buffer to my students or to showcase the separate spaces where I “allow” the mother tongue for writing; nor are these spaces to remain sheltered and de facto segregated from the mainstream discourses and traditional notions of what counts as text, knowledge, and essay in schooling. The purpose is to create a space for the “empowerment of minority students and pluralization of dominant
discourses” (Canagarajah, 1997, p. 195). To suggest that my students—many of whom are (or are the children of) domestic workers and home aids for affluent whites; lower-rung aids in various public institutions such as schools and hospitals; key, underpaid laborers in the service industry; and even working-too-hard-to-be-middle-class professionals without Bachelor’s degrees who must watch younger, less-experienced whites climb the ladder past them—do not know the functioning of the mainstream, power, racism, and the consequences for challenging that form a type of paternalism not too far off from old plantation lores (you know the ones: Without ole massa, the po’ fieldhands just would not know what to do with they’s new emancipations).

If we think back on early African American technologists and the technical environment of the time of Post-Reconstruction, we see that the entrance of someone like Lewis Howard Latimer, one of the most celebrated black inventors in the realm of electricity, required his total assimilation such that by the end of his life he shunned any proclamation or admission of himself as a black person (Fouche, 2004). But we do not have to re-clone Lewis Lattimore-type realities onto the possibilities that are offered to students of African descent and their Pan-African rhetorics in their CMC or F2F classrooms today. I’ll close with a reminder of the meaning of Black Long Distance Writers, a name that my students defined themselves to describe what/how their own Afro-geographies do, look, sound, and feel. It is a charge to be the kind of writers of African descent who textualize and technologize social change for the long haul to come, going all the distances. I intend to run in that race with them.

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