



# OBSIDIAN

Literature & Arts  
in the African Diaspora

Call & Response: Experiments in Joy  
Furious Flower:  
Seeding the Future of African American Poetry  
Fall 2015  
41.1 • 41.2



# THE WORK OF BLACK LITERATURE IN THE AGE OF DIGITAL REPRODUCIBILITY<sup>1</sup>

John Keene

We live in an increasingly digital and digitized world, with bits and bytes underpinning not just specific technological artifacts but the material structures of our governments, our economies, our societies, and our lives.<sup>2</sup> Black literary art, and literature by Black writers, exists in every society in which there are Black people, and increasingly circulates by a variety of means, including through digital channels, as Paul Gilroy pointed out in his landmark study “The Black Atlantic as a Counter-culture of Modernity,” which was one of the first scholarly texts in which I read critical discussion of the results of “digital simulation,” his focus being on Black musical production.<sup>3</sup> This paper, which is admittedly speculative in the fullest sense of that term, seeks to take a specific thread lying at the nexus of these two ideas, which is: why, given the ubiquity of the digital and its presence materially and thematically in various forms of American and global contemporary literature and literary practice, and given its extensive incorporation in other forms of Black artistic and cultural production, does it seemingly remain so absent still in contemporary Black literary production, especially Black poetry? A corollary question would be, is it really so absent? Additionally, what would or could a Black digital poetics look like? Why is there not an archive of local or global Black digital literature or cyber literature? My focus will be on African American literature (pace Kenneth Warren<sup>4</sup>) and American literature by Black writers, and primarily poetry, but if the evidence bears me out, I will suggest that at least for the current moment, the net of this assessment can be cast, with caveats, more widely.

Before I proceed, I should be even clearer about what I am talking about: when I mention *digital literature* and *cyber literature*, I am thinking specifically of works falling under the category of cyberpoetries, hypertext literary works, programmed and programmable texts, animated GIFS, CD-ROM-based multimedia works with literary texts at their center, and related forms and genres. (The digital humanities constitute a different, larger category.) All of these would also fall under the category of electronic literature, or, to use the term coined by the Brazilian poet Philadelpho Menezes, “intersign” literature, whose formulation, as the title of his introductory essay to the 1998 *Poesía Intersignos* exhibit at the Paço das Artes in São Paulo suggested, ranges from “printed to sound and digital poetry,” thus also including print works foregrounding visibility and the permeability of language and signification themselves. To these I would also include emergent digital platforms such as Weblogs, or blogs; works created using communication technologies such as SMS (texting) and social media technologies such as MySpace, Facebook, and Twitter; and other systems and platforms whose conceptual and material basis proceeds from these technologies. (I should also note the distinctive new and advancing forms of hardware, including smartphones, tablet computers, electronic readers and books, and so forth.)

Moreover, given the wide array of creative works produced by or incorporating aspects of digital technologies in genres such as music, film, dance, and so forth, my focus here is on works categorizable as literature, which is to say, the art of written, textual works. In terms of digital literature, there is a large and growing body of works that initially appeared as far back as the early 1970s, particularly in terms of the earliest cyber poetries, which saw their heyday during the 1990s and first decade of the twentieth century. In the last few years, even newer such works have emerged. One noteworthy recent example is the 2011 Pulitzer Prize winner in fiction Jennifer Egan’s Twitter-novel, *Black Box*, which she tweeted under the @NYerFiction tag and simultaneously published in the *New Yorker*. Although Egan’s novel is hardly the only such work of literature to utilize Twitter’s platform (and format) as one of its primary forms of construction,<sup>5</sup> it does represent one of the first times that such an acclaimed author, working with one of the most highly regarded American literary and cultural magazines, has done so.

Nathan Brown, in his 2006 essay “The Function of Digital Poetry at the Present Time,” cites the media theorist N. Katherine Hayles’s definition, towards understanding the “ontology of new media art,” of a key difference between print and digital literatures as residing in the transition “from object to event” (Brown 1), mirroring while differing from Menezes’s distinction between print and virtuality. In his essay, Brown is quick to point out that this shift, as a conceptual paradigm, is not new, especially in other artistic genres (the “becoming-event” of visual art, cinema, dance, etc.), and that other theorists, such as Charles Olson, with his 1950 manifesto on “projective verse,”<sup>6</sup> stressed a new understanding of and approach to the kineticism particular kinds of print literary texts falling under this category, their antecedents, and many of their successors, have attempted. In addition, Brown credits Hayles’s recognition that print texts themselves have utilized means to manipulate the legibility of temporality, via tools such as “punctuation, line breaks, white spaces” and so on, as well as her understanding that “both print and electronic poetry”—and I would extend the concept here to literature—“‘evolve within [a] general temporal flow’ that includes writing, coding, production, performance, and reading” (qtd. in Brown 1), as a prelude for presenting Hayles’s taxonomy of this shift from the print to the digital, which basically entails how each “organize[s] this flow differently.”<sup>7</sup>

I broach Brown’s discussion of Hayles’s paradigm to suggest that one way of thinking about the possibilities the digital entails is to consider what it might make ontologically possible in the artwork itself, as well as in the act of reader or participant engagement. Beyond virtuality, one key element, as Brown and Hayles suggest, is the event’s greater capacity to emphasize process because of the constitutive and fluid materiality of the digital. The digital work starts from the ontological premise of the “processual.” The animated literary GIF, for example, is never stable, but always in flux; the hypertext novel perhaps can be read the same way more than once, but its very nature posits it as a particular kind of assemblage entailing the reader’s/viewer’s choice of how to proceed through it—and thus put it together. Another capacity of the event’s digitality is to foreground material instability and contingency in a way that a print text cannot. In a literal sense, whereas a book

might last—and many have—one hundred or one thousand years, there is no guarantee that a digital work will even work, let alone endure, in a decade’s time, because of hardware and software functionality and compatibility issues.<sup>8</sup>

Yet this fallibility might be significant thematically, theoretically, or in some other way to what the work aims to convey. Yet another involves the possibility of enacting and embodying temporality, particularly in relation to process and material instability, in ways that a print text cannot. Again, this is not to say that print texts are incapable of doing this, but, as I shall attempt to show at the end of this paper, a digital work may do this in distinctive ways that are crucial to the reader’s engagement with and understanding of the artwork. If these three possibilities, and there are certainly others, bear upon work created by all artists, then I believe we might say that given the history and experiences of people of African descent across the globe, in relation to questions of process, material and affective instability, and temporality, the (relative absence of the) work of Black digital literature is worth investigation.

#### The Larger Picture—Afrofuturism & Digital Technologies

In 2002, the critical journal *Social Text* dedicated an entire issue to the topic of “Afrofuturism.”<sup>9</sup> The issue represented the culmination of conversations, both online on the Afrofuturism listserv, as Alondra Nelson points out in her introduction, and historically and discursively through various forms and sites of cultural production (Nelson 9). The term “Afro-futurism” itself, Nelson indicates in her footnotes, had been coined by Mark Dery in 1993 “in an introductory essay” in *South Atlantic Quarterly* “that accompanied an interview with cultural critics Tricia Rose and Greg Tate and theorist and sci-fi writer Samuel Delany” (Nelson 14). For her part, Nelson, who created the listserv in 1998 “as a project of the arts collective apogee with the goal of initiating dialogue that would culminate in a symposium called AfroFuturism|Forum,” defined Afrofuturism as “‘African American voices’ with ‘other stories to tell about culture, technology and things to come’” (Nelson 9). With works by established and then-emerging scholars such as Nelson, Alexander G. Weheliye, Ron Eglash, Anna Everett, and Kali Tal, and writers and artists such as Tania Hargest, Tracie Morris, and Fatimah Tuggar,

the issue not only served as a means for offering a multifaceted perspective on the concept of Afrofuturism but, as Nelson indicates, as a counterweight to the new criticism around technoculture that would seek to eliminate or elide questions of race and the crucial roles and viewpoints of Black people in what was then a still somewhat new public forum.