

Afrofuturist Intellectual Mixtapes: A Classroom Case Study

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Abstract

This article is a classroom case study of the Intellectual Mixtape Project, an AudioVisual digital humanities module. The intellectual mixtape uses jazz and hip hop as a framework to create an audio compilation and “conversation” that samples literary-audio texts (such as SunRa speeches, Octavia Butler interviews, Tracy K. Smith’s poetry readings, etc.). Each track of the intellectual mixtape has three audios: 1) the literary-audio texts from the syllabus, 2) the students’ voice in their own words, and 3) an audio of the students’ choice. As a companion to each track, students write 500 words of liner notes that must include the title of their track and their curation and mixing decisions. Students then publish their entire intellectual mixtape (three or more tracks) with original or “remixed” cover art on an online platform.

The first part of the study will discuss the structure of the intellectual mixtape assignments. In these assignments, students are provided with literary-audio texts, required to complete and submit audio homework assignments, and taught the basics of audio editing. This method of teaching and analyzing literature shifts the practice of literary analysis from top down approaches that privileges the authority of the text and instead encourages the student to “converse” with the text to create new knowledge. This methods also reflects the artistic practice of Afrofuturist artists and theorist who improvise, remix, and sample to create their work.

The second part of the study will discuss a performance and midterm adaptation of the Intellectual Mixtape Project entitled Sound of Space: An Interactive Afrofuturist Experience. “Sound of Space” was an immersive performance with four-sensory stations that featured Afrofuturist themes. The midterm adaptation was showcased in the Cube, a four-story high, state-of-the-art multimedia black box theater at Virginia Tech. In preparation for the performance, students merged sound engineering, 360 degree-video-projection, improvisational performance, and light design. “Sound of Space” introduced students and audiences’ to an immersive Afrofuturist-audio experience and pushed the boundaries of literary analysis.

The third part of the study will address challenges with the Intellectual Mixtape Project. Challenges include finding relevant literary-audio texts and dealing with the many limitations imposed by U.S. copyright law. Some ways to address the challenges imposed by U.S. copyright law might be to 1) reclassify sampling audio as a form of quotation, 2) use databases of copyright-free music, 3) find culturally significant works from lesser-known artists who will license their tracks, and/or 4) pay royalties.

Introduction

In “Afrofuturism to Vibranium and Beyond,” a cross-listed graduate and undergraduate English special topics course, taught by Tyechia Thompson and assisted by Dashiel Carrera (GTA) at Virginia Tech, we engaged several theoretical and artistic frameworks for defining Afrofuturism. One such definition was from Reynaldo Anderson and Charles E. Jones’s edited collection *Afrofuturism 2.0: The Rise of Astro Blackness*, in which they defined Afrofuturism 2.0 as:

The early twenty-first century technogenesis of Black identity reflecting counter histories, hacking and or appropriating the influence of network software, database logic, cultural analytics, deep remixability, neurosciences, enhancement and augmentation, gender fluidity, posthuman possibility, the speculative sphere with transdisciplinary applications and has grown into an important Diasporic

This definition was current and broad enough to cover all the three modules of the course, including the first module, which was the Afrofuturist intellectual mixtape assignment. For this assignment, students took several samples from selected audio recordings on the syllabus and added their own voice and another audio recording of their choosing. Students then wrote "liner notes" in which they discussed their choice of samples, the use of their own voice, and how these choices connect to larger discourses within Afrofuturism. As such, the Afrofuturist intellectual mixtape assignment made use of hacking and/or appropriating as well as deep remixability while engaging a multitude of discourses that make up Afrofuturistic expression.

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In the course, we also engaged other definitions of Afrofuturism such as Alondra Nelson's 2002 articulation of the term as "'African American voices' with 'other stories to tell about culture, technology and things to come.' The term [Afrofuturism] was chosen as the best umbrella for the concerns of 'the list' [the AfroFuturism (AF) listserv] — as it has come to be known by its members — sci-fi imagery, futurist themes, and technological innovation in the African diaspora" (9). Nelson's definition was fitting for our literature course that brought together sci-fi, futurist, and technological stories by Octavia Butler, Nnedi Okorafor, Wanuri Kahiu, among others. Moreover, Ytasha Womack's succinct definition of Afrofuturism as "an intersection of imagination, technology, the future and liberation" from her book *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*, which introduces readers to the paradigm of Afrofuturism, was useful for engaging the works of several artists and the major discourses of Afrofuturism in preparation for the intellectual mixtape assignment.

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Teaching Afrofuturism works within the intellectual mixtape assignment was an innovative method of teaching and analyzing literature and composition techniques that shifted the practice of literary and cultural analysis from top-down approaches that privileged the authority of academic or assigned "texts" to student-centered mixing that encouraged the use of audio, images, and text to create new knowledge. This assignment is within particular traditions of Africana studies and rhetoric and composition, in which students are encouraged and taught to improvise, remix, and sample in order to create distinctive work [Carter 2019]. In particular, the intellectual mixtape assignment also imparts skills such as audio editing, process writing, thematic-website-template building as well as collaboration and performance.

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Furthermore, the Afrofuturist intellectual mixtape assignment is what Bryan Carter would consider digital Africana studies and what Kim Gallon refers to as Black digital humanities. Carter's digital Africana studies is an approach to "using a number of digital tools to help us experience Africana studies very differently and to help students express their understanding of whatever that course content happens to be very very differently" [Carter 2019]. Carter's approach is innovative, technological, and pedagogical yet grounded in the field of Africana studies. Similarly, the Afrofuturist intellectual mixtape assignment is grounded in digital Africana studies (since Afrofuturism is a part of Africana studies), and the technologies taught in the assignment are used to strengthen students' understanding of Afrofuturism in unconventional ways. Additionally, the Afrofuturist intellectual mixtape is a black digital humanities assignment, for it "reveals how methodological approaches for studying and thinking about the category of blackness may come to bear on and transform the digital processes and tools used to study humanity" [Gallon 2016]. In *Afrofuturism to Vibranium and Beyond*, the category of blackness becomes the categories of blackness as the students study, critique, and create counter histories, alternate destinies, and posthuman identities through the aesthetics of their mixtape tracks and their interactive Afrofuturist performance, which are featured later in this article.

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As the title suggests, this article is a case study of the Afrofuturist intellectual mixtape assignment. It proceeds as follows: we first describe the seven-part layout of the Afrofuturist intellectual mixtape assignment. Next, we provide three key aspects to teaching the intellectual mixtape assignment. Then we discuss additional approaches that buttress our analysis of the students' mixtapes in connection to digital humanities and Afrofuturism. Subsequently, we discuss sampling, conversing, and "flowing" in relation to these approaches and examine three examples of students' work. Afterward, we describe the process of preparing for the students' midterm performance in which their mixtapes were curated and shared with a public audience. In the final part of the article, we question whether US Copyright Law is antithetical to multimodal digital literacy studies, flow, and empathic engagement with Afrofuturist source texts, and speculate about future uses of the intellectual mixtape.

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Intellectual Mixtape Assignment: Project Description

The intellectual mixtape is an audio-visual-textual assignment with seven-parts. In part one, students listened to recordings (such as lectures, poems, songs, interviews, etc.) that were assigned (on the syllabus) for homework and class discussion. For the second part, students learned the basics of audio editing in order to create their first tracks of the intellectual mixtape. The first audio editing assignment asked students to improvise in order to learn how to edit audio; therefore, from the beginning, Afrofuturist concepts were pedagogically centered. Their track selections and the mixing decisions were, for the most part, impromptu. For the third part, students created the first of three audio tracks, which was 1 min long. All audio tracks included at least three regions of audio: a sample from 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 wrote 500 words of liner notes that included a title for the track and their curation and mixing decisions. For the fourth part, students created a second track that was 1.5 minutes in length. The second track was a collaboration with another student in the course; it also featured 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 was a third audio track that was between 1.5 to 2 minutes in length, and collaboration was optional; the third track had the same criteria for regions and liner notes. For the sixth part, the students posted their three-track mixtape online (often in a web template service such as Wix) with liner notes and included "remixed" or original cover art. In part seven, students performed the intellectual mixtape. In seven weeks, the intellectual mixtape assignment taught students skills such as audio editing, process writing, audio-visual synchronizing, thematic-website-template building as well as collaboration and performance.

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Setting-Up the Assignment

In order to prepare students to create their mixtapes, we made sure each student had the resources that they needed to succeed. It is important to note that it was not enough for students to have access to the material; it was beneficial that the students engaged with the material in homework assignments and class discussions prior to recording their intellectual mixtapes. When students were exposed to the material prior to creating their intellectual mixtapes, they had additional contexts to build upon. Here, we will highlight three strategies that were instrumental to the success of the assignment—syllabus design, a tech survey, and a workshop on audio-editing. First, curating the syllabus required finding sufficient recordings—preferably MP3 for the intellectual mixtape assignment — and making those recordings available on the syllabus. When there was material essential to the study of Afrofuturism that was not available in an audio or video recording, it was kept on the syllabus and paired with audio dealing with the same subject. For instance, Samuel R. Delany's short story "aye, and Gomorrah" was course reading, and it was paired with an audio interview with Delany. Furthermore, the syllabus only included recordings that were primary sources in which the Afrofuturist artists, scholars, activists, and/or practitioners spoke about their own work. The videos were selected from platforms such as YouTube and Vimeo and then converted to MP3s. There are two distinctions that determined how the audio/video recordings were featured on the syllabus: videos that were "live-action" of the Afrofuturist were added to the syllabus directly, but videos that were slideshows of still photos were converted to MP3 and put on the syllabus as MP3s.

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Second, we began the course with a tech survey to get an inventory of the students' tech needs and to assess their exposure and comfort with the technologies we would use in class.^[1] Our survey had eight questions and was distributed on Survey Monkey a week before classes began.^[2] The survey helped us to determine if students would need loaner equipment and whether they would work with Audacity or GarageBand to learn audio-editing or if we would teach both; it also determined our approach to teaching audio-editing so that the students were comfortable enough with the audio-editing software to complete the assignment.

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Third, we taught the students GarageBand or Audacity, which was a learning objective for the intellectual mixtape assignment. Teaching an overview of audio-editing required some preparation before class such as requiring that everyone had headphones and GarageBand or Audacity (with Lame encoder) installed on their computers by the start of class, creating a shared drive that was available with MP3/WAV files for students to select audio recordings, and disseminating written instructions of what we were covering in class while facilitating a live demonstration. We also made a screencast of the demonstration available, so students could watch later. We gave the students fourteen tasks

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to complete after they opened the program.

Intellectual Mixtape/Audacity Handout

Getting Started

- Open Audacity
- **Drag and Drop** Audio file into Audacity

Working with Tracks

Today, we are focusing on cutting, dragging, and fading in/out.

- Find the clip from the First Audio that you want to cut and/or copy. Once you find it, use the **Selection Tool** to highlight the part of the track you want to Cut and/or Copy.
- Once highlighted, you can go to the tools in the **Edit Tool Bar**, and you can also access tools in **Edit in the Menu Bar**. If you simply want to delete a highlighted clip, you can **Press Delete** on your keypad and it will delete.

To Fade In/Out

- Highlight the desired clip from the audio, and go to **Effect in the Menu Bar**, and select **Fade In or Fade Out**.

To Save Your Work

- Go to **File** in the Menu Bar
- Click **Export Audio**
- Choose **MP3** as the save option

Upload your Practice Track for the Intellectual Mixtape into the LMS.

Figure 1. Handout given to students that chose to use Audacity.

Intellectual Mixtape/GarageBand Handout

Getting Started

- Choose **Empty Project**
- Select **Audio**
No Input (unless you have an external device you are connecting)

Working With Tracks

Today, we are focusing on cutting, dragging, and fading out/in.

- Drag and Drop your Audio into GarageBand
- Find the Clip from the First Audio. Once you find it Click **Command and T** to Cut.
- You can drag the audio layers.
- Find **Fade Out** in the **Mix Menu Bar**
Click **Show Hide Automation** (it looks like two points with a line connecting them). It is at the top right of the track menu.

Click within the layer the two points that you want to fade in/fade out.

Save Your Work

- Go to **Share** in the Menu Bar
Click **Export Song to Disk**
Choose **MP3** as the save option

Upload your Practice Track for the Intellectual Mixtape into BlackBoard

Figure 2. Handout given to students that chose to use Garageband.

The students' execution of the audio-editing practice assignment was fast-paced and improvisational. Because of the time constraints, students worked quickly and performatively in a way that they normally would not. They learned and created their practice mixtape tracks on the fly. As a result, we were not concerned if the practice track made sense, and it was not significant if the track stopped abruptly. Instead, when this assignment was assessed, we checked to see if 1) we had received the assignment as an MP3 or as a WAV file, 2) the assignment was 1 minute in length, 3) the track had three different regions in which one was the student's voice, 4) the track included a fade-in or fade-out at some point in the recording, and 5) the track had an effect (it could be a duplicate sound, reverbs, etc.). This assessment gave us an indication of whether or not the students understood the basics of audio-editing and could build on this knowledge to complete the Afrofuturist intellectual mixtape project.

Curating the syllabus with sufficient and appropriate audio recordings that featured the Afrofuturist artists, scholars, activists, and/or practitioners discussing their work was the substratum of the intellectual mixtape assignment. It was the basis of how the students developed flow, sampled, and engaged in internally persuasive discourse and techno-vernacular creativity. Creating the tech survey allowed us to prepare for our students and guarantee that they had access to equipment and software, as well as ample time to finish assignments. Without this kind of preparation, the course could have been bottle-necked by the technology and diverted focus from the course content. Finally, teaching the basics of audio-editing was one aspect that makes the intellectual mixtape assignment a digital humanities project. The assignment was multimodal and encouraged students to develop their own voices.

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A Layered Approach to the Intellectual Mixtape

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:

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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.

[Locke 2018]

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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 assignment. This assignment, as presented in the course *Afrofuturism to Vibranium and Beyond*, engaged the domain-specific content of Afrofuturism alongside media and communication literacies. The intellectual mixtape assignment met 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.

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Furthermore, Nettrice R. Gaskins' 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" [Gaskins 2016, 30]. Appropriation of a similar kind was evident in the intellectual mixtape assignment. Students appropriated recordings (sample) from the syllabus and used those recordings 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" [Gaskins 2016, 30–31]. 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 their 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" [Gaskins 2016, 31].

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Reinvention (of the self) was adopted by most students creating futuristic content who took on a pseudonym such as Grim Reaper, FutureShe, or StarGirl 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

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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 was 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" [Bakhtin 1991, 424]. 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 was an application of internally persuasive discourse in that students selected audio from the syllabus and synthesized it with and/or juxtaposed it against their own voice. The students' mixed/assimilated the recordings and created their own perspectives. Bakhtin's internally persuasive discourse provides a useful framework for understanding how students developed their own discourses in the intellectual mixtape.

Though varied, Locke's, Gaskins', 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 encouraged 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 had an opportunity to develop their own ideas in conversation with the assigned Afrofuturists recordings.

Flowing Through Conversation and Sampling

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" [Green 2017, 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, layering, and rupture in ways that press for newer considerations of language and literature within English studies" [Green 2017, 176]. Green's exploration of how flow can be incorporated in English composition courses was a springboard for the intellectual mixtape project, which adopted Green's concept of flow into audio-visual and written compositions in *Afrofuturism: To Vibranium and Beyond*.

Flow as a nonstandard, flexible writing practice is expanded when adopted in text and audio compositions. In creating their intellectual mixtapes, students used 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 created intellectual mixtapes were 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 2005]

Interview with DJ Kool Herc on *Fresh Air*.

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 improvisational because Herc and Coke La Rock provide an improvisational conversation between the song and the live audience, and because the sample (appropriation) is reinvented in each iteration by artists such as Jay-Z and YG (which is also a conversation).^[5] This same process of sampling and conversing was the basis of the intellectual mixtape assignment, and it is what created flow in David Green's articulation of the term. It was in students' flow—their intentions, voice, self-acceptance, and diversity—that emerged in this assignment. We will now examine three tracks for how students' flow was expressed.

An intellectual mixtape track "Xe3" (pronounced Chi) by TSaunds featured conversation and flow. In "Xe3," TSaunds sampled "Tales of Dr. Funkenstein," "Venus Fly" by Grimes and Janelle Monáe, and "Window Licker" by Aphex Twin. TSaunds mixing of these audio recordings 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. In the liner notes, TSaunds wrote:

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 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 2019]

Track "Xe3" created by student artist TSaunds.

TSaunds explained that he is evolving P-funk through his sampling of a sound effect from "Window Licker." He used the liberty of P-funk to sample Grimes and Janelle Monáe and further develop a sci-fi sound. He also sampled several excerpts from *Tales of Dr. Funkenstein*, a documentary on George Clinton, for the additional context of P-funk. TSaunds flow emerged as the unique story he told of a liberating teleportation, and it was a direct result of the conversations with the tracks he sampled.

There are two Afrofuturist tracks where self-acceptance emerged from flow. The first track is titled "FAT GYALS" by Lauren Garretson and Starg*rl. The students who created this track used humor, irony, and pain to challenge stereotypes and assumptions about black women and their bodies. They presented 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 strengthened their conversation by speaking at the same time, repeating and/or responding to each other. They also affirmed all body types through the track's intro that featured 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. In the film, Stacey proceeds to order for Jazmin (on the skinny side of the menu), but Jazmin modifies the order and adds "the works." Additionally, Lauren Garretson and Starg*rl aligned themselves and their images with G/god when they sampled 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." In their liner notes, Lauren Garretson and Starg*rl wrote, "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" was an Afrofuturist audio conversation about presence, inclusion, and acceptance. Track "FAT GYALS" created by student artists Starg*rl and Garretson.

Flow was also demonstrated through sonic, rhetorical layering in the track "Space Less" by FutureShe. FutureShe began her track with a personal understanding of space and place that was 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 presented otherness and doubt regarding the possibility of experiencing a utopic space outside of herself. She began the track stating, "Will there be space for me — for all of me?" Her voice also suggested that she must find her own space since elsewhere is

inhabited by others. FutureShe then mixed FKA Twigs's "How's That" into her track. FKA Twigs's recording became a companion for her, initiating her to turn within. In her liner notes, FutureShe wrote, "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 was a flow that used samples to produce a perspective that the only space where we can truly be accepted is within ourselves. Track *space is the place* created by student artist FutureShe.

The creation and performance of the intellectual mixtape provided opportunities for students to engage in popular, academic, and mystical discourses connected to Afrofuturists art and practices. The recordings that the students' sampled and mixed provided them with digital media skills used in the digital humanities. The process of audio editing also expanded how the students engaged with language, meaning, and interpretation in an English special topics course. This type of engagement permitted an internally persuasive discourse to be expressed—one in which the students' own ideas were accented from the words of others. Through their sampling and conversing with the assigned recordings, the intellectual mixtape assignment opened up opportunities for students to flow and express what mattered 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 the creation.

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Performing the Intellectual Mixtape

The students also adapted their intellectual mixtapes to a performance environment. This supported our Afrofuturist pedagogical framework for two reasons. First, this assignment requires students to engage in a new multimodal form of performance. This is in line with Locke's vision of a multimodal future for liberal arts education. Second, the assignment requires students to reinvent and improvise as they adapt their mixtapes to a performance environment. While the Afrofuturist performance was on the syllabus and the course schedule, students were not instructed to create their mixtapes with their performance in mind. They had to rethink how to perform their mixtapes after they had already been created. Gaskin argues that improvisation and reinvention are an integral part of Afrofuturist artistic practice. In this way, the performance part of the assignment is also Afrofuturist.

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Performing the intellectual mixtape was predominately student-led and took 2-3 weeks. 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 et al. 2016]. The Cube can fit up to 198 people and features the Cyclorama, an optional large 360-degree-panoramic projection wall in the center.

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In preparation for the midterm intellectual mixtape performance, we and staff members of the Institute for Creativity, Arts and Technology led discussions with the students about ways to adapt the mixtapes to the space, and we required that they apply their knowledge of Afrofuturism to create the performance. 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 the stage. This holds roots in an Afrofuturist ideal that the demarcation between artist and audience member results in an imbalanced power relationship that should be actively worked against [Gaskins 2016]. 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. Students decided to make the Cyclorama the centerpiece of the exhibit. 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.

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Figure 3. Students preparing in the Cyclorama.

The students then 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 was representative not only of their mixtapes as a whole but also of different themes within Afrofuturist discourse. "Flow" focused on the 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, Sankofa (a word in the Twi language and a Ghanaian Adinkra symbol meaning "go back and get it," but also the title of a Haile Gerima film about abduction in the transatlantic slave trade), 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 liberating communal dance welcomes all (as is the case with Parliament Funkadelic's "We Got the Funk").

Once the students' tracks were sorted into groups, 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 simultaneously. 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 is reflective of Sun Ra's idea that creation is a form of teleportation as it is in *Space is the Place*. This slow gradient of mixed audio recordings 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.

In addition to designing the space itself, students had to conceive of a title for the performance. We brainstormed the title for the performance over multiple meetings. Students played word association games and constructed "word salad" in order to think generatively about the language and spaces 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 in the Cyclorama.



Figure 4. Poster for Sound of Space performance.

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 to be a core tenet to the creation of Afrofuturist art [Hinton 2018]. 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, it was our hope that the 360-degree-panoramic projection wall of the Cyclorama and the interactive-immersive experience in the Cube would foster empathy and embodiment among audience members [Bertrand et al. 2018]. To produce this, each person was asked to beat a Garifuna Drum upon entering the Cube.

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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. 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. This footage was selected by the students, who found videos on Youtube they felt were aesthetically cohesive and sent them to the videographer. These images were meant to celebrate Afrofuturism as a form of embodied, innovative, eclectic, and physical expression.

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Figure 5. Transportation Corner of the performance.



Figure 6. Funk Corner of the performance.

Next, the "Flow" corner featured an aromatherapy diffuser with a 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. 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, which encouraged audience members to participate in the cathartic cleansing of testifying. 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.



Figure 7. Flow Corner of the performance.

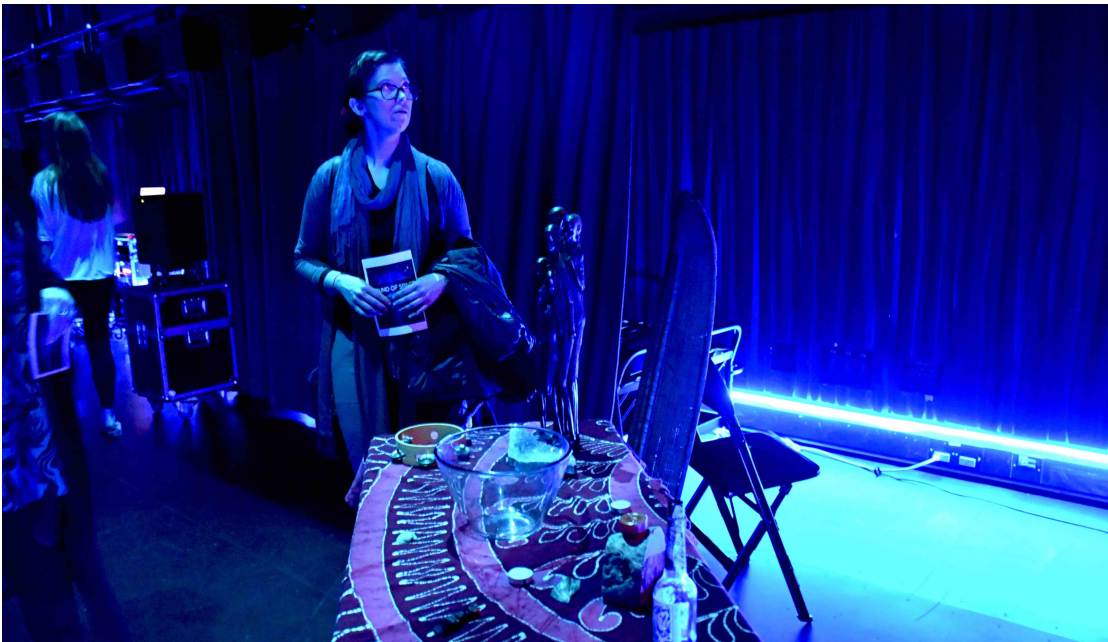


Figure 8. Testimony Corner of the performance.

The midterm intellectual mixtape performance took place on March 7th, 2019, in the middle of the afternoon. 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.



Figure 9. Inside of the Cyclorama during the performance.

The *Sound of Space* performance serves as a useful model for exploring embodiment through sound and performance in the digital humanities classroom. Encouraging students to think multimodally and asking them to reinvent and improvise with their own work supports an Afrofuturist pedagogy rooted in the theories of Gaskin and Locke. It also supports a broader digital humanities pedagogy. By asking students to rethink their work in a performance setting, this assignment asks students to form a more intimate and embodied relationship with the creative works studied. Rather than passively quoting from these works, students are asked to envision how these works can be presented so that they will be engaging to a live audience. In doing so, they behave as Afrofuturist creators, many of whom are live performers. Much of this process can be replicated in any digital humanities course in which instructors want students to embody the perspectives of the creators and artists being studied, particularly those courses in which the syllabus contains performance art.

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The Challenges of Copyright Law

Given the importance of access to audio, we want to specifically address one major challenge and opportunity for the assignment. 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 idea that in Afrofuturism, "improvisation, call and response, hacking, and tinkering elicit the active engagement and participation of the at-large community (audience)" [Gaskins 2016, 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.

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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.^[6] 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.

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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 century old and many films prior to 1964, for which the copyright has already expired.^[7] 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.

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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.^[8] 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 Bakhtin'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" [Bakhtin 1991]. 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 limiting themselves to short quotations that could subordinate or elevate their perspectives. In contrast, we argue for the Afrofuturist techno-vernacular creativity identified by Nettrice Gaskins, in which the reappropriation of cultural artifacts is part of "counter-dominant social or political systems" [Gaskins 2016]. We feel this reappropriation 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.

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

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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...?

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1:27:42

Figure 10. Professor Adam Banks in his Langston Hughes Visiting Professorship Lecture at the University of Kansas.

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 2010]. 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? We argue instead that in order for the digital humanities to more fully realize an Afrofuturist praxis, copyright law should be challenged just as it has been for decades by practitioners of Afrofuturist art.

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Conclusion

The various pedagogical methods here could be realized in any number of digital humanities classrooms, not just in the context of an Afrofuturism course.^[9] 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 intellectual mixtape as a new form of academic discourse. The intellectual mixtape does not necessarily have to be a replacement for traditional academic discourses. 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

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with a 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 digital humanities 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 is viewed through the lens 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 2018]. Any digital humanities 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.

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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 recordings 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 audio recordings constitute internally persuasive discourse and promote empathic engagement both in the intellectual mixtape assignment and in the *Sound of Space* performance.

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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 use 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 encourages flow and expression of their individual world views. A digital humanities pedagogy with Afrofuturist intellectual mixtapes is one more step towards a more equitable and engaging future for liberal arts education and the digital humanities.

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Notes

[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, which was the first year she taught the intellectual mixtape assignment in its current iteration.

[2] <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/ZB7KSPS>

[3] How 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.

[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.

[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.

[6] 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 and popular texts of Afrofuturism.

[7] As of Donald Trump's 2018 signing of the Music Modernization Act, music copyright generally lasts a century. 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.

[8] 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 [United States Copyright Circular 2016, 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. 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.

[9] Tyechia Thompson has used the intellectual mixtape assignment in five different courses (including an online course) at three different universities.

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