

RENDERING BLACKNESS: SCREEN TECHNOLOGIES AS AFRICAN AMERICAN CULTURAL PERFORMANCE

Austin Dorell Jackson (Michigan State University)

Nicole Ashanti McFarlane (Fayetteville State University)

Nicole Elaine Snell (Bentley University)

Keon Mandell Pettway (NC State University)

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Abstract

Austin Jackson, Assistant Professor, Residential College of Arts and Humanities at Michigan State University (Chair)

This roundtable explores blackness as technical design methodology and furthers discourses about the material role of technology in black cultural performance. The larger goal of this project is to examine the affordances and limitations of African American rhetoric and balance the cultural complexities of design theories with the technical practices of designing for and within spaces of black cultural politics. These design practices include closed-captioning, digital learning, and typography. These views of African American culture offer theoretical perspectives and juxtapose dynamic formations of black identity. Questions posed by this roundtable include, “how can new media productions elicit sensations of blackness?” And, “what can African American rhetoric contribute to the inventions and arrangements of cultural spaces produced through material, print, and digital media?”

Nicole E. Snell, Assistant Professor of Information Design and Corporate Communication at Bentley University (Panelist 1)

The roundtable begins with the recognition that the fields of critical race theory and disability studies have paid little to no attention to

the depiction of African American English vernacular in closed-captioning screen texts. This speaker describes the diversity of language among African American English vernacular speakers, including the deaf and hard of hearing. Furthermore, the speaker demonstrates the materiality of linguistic misrepresentation to identify the issue of racial marginalization in assistive technologies.

Nicole Ashanti McFarlane, Assistant Professor of English, Rhetoric and Composition at Fayetteville State University (Panelist 2)

The next portion of the roundtable explores the teaching of professional writing with social media and explores the rhetorical interplay between schoolwork and workplace in an HBCU setting as a situation for pedagogical intervention. While techno-spatial theories of racial disputes over educational justice have been applied to studies of classrooms and other architectural learning spaces, the study of online course designs as racialized environments remains under explored. This project considers how digital learning environments can perpetuate “separate and unequal” access and suggests alter/native sites for the invention of usable designs that enable critical participation among African American students as they become creative problem-solvers in the knowledge economy.

Keon Mandell Pettway, PhD Program in Communication, Rhetoric, and Digital Media at North Carolina State University (Panelist 3)

The third roundtable presenter examines letterforms as cultural associations. Typographic elements have “character, spirit and personality” and can identify “designers’ times and temperaments, and even their nationalities and religious faiths” (Bringhurst 99). Typographic forms also play a crucial role in communicating blackness. According to Jennifer De Vere Brody, Ellison’s use of scriptio continua, which does not include spaces between words (681) is significant to the study of typography in African American cultural production. This project traces typographic blackness from early African/African American visual art to contemporary African American museums’ displays of digital typefaces. This presentation argues that scholars must not only critique the linguistic meaning of alphabetic text as representations of blackness, but also view typography as a visceral interface of cultural meaning.