BLACK VERNACULAR: READING NEW MEDIA

A talk that asks whether or not new media provide more opportunities for Black artists than conventional modes of distribution. Presented at SXSW Interactive 2013.

Thank you for coming. This is my first time at SXSW and I'm excited to be here.

This afternoon I'm going to talk about the black aesthetic and the visual culture of new media.

I'm a web designer, mostly. This project is called "Everything I've Ever Wanted to Know." It lives at everythingiveeverwantedtoknow.com.

Everything I've Ever Wanted to Know contains three years of my Google searches in a drop down list. If a visitor clicks on any of the terms, he or she is taken back to the beginning of the list. I did this so that the language of search was the focus, instead of the content of my queries.

At the time I had just discovered French avant-garde poetry movement OuLiPo, particularly the work of Raymond Queneau and George Perec. I was excited about using constraints to reveal the ideology of different mediums and genres as they had.

The first time it was exhibited was in a group show alongside two white males, both peers and close friends. A woman came to the opening and hated it. She said it was "white people art," until she was introduced to me. After that she loved it.

What does it mean for a black woman to make minimal, masculine net art? What about this piece is "not black?" Can my identity be expressed as an aesthetic quality?

As a black artist I'm regularly asked to dissect my practice in terms of race. Sometimes I'm happy to oblige, but other times it feels like a trap, or cage, if you will.

In his landmark study "Distinction," Pierre Bourdieu argued that taste cultures have a "social logic." Upon examination groups like Power Moms, Sneakerheads, Skaters or Fashionistas share remarkably similar socioeconomic backgrounds. Maybe I started listening to punk music because I liked the way it sounded, but I must also credit my growing up middle-class in the suburbs of

Southern California feeling isolated and bored with what the 14 year old me would've termed "the status quo."

Blacks are not monolithic, but race is a shared social condition. Blackness is a set of common experiences that inform an aesthetic. In 1903, DuBois first wrote about the color line and since then it's become shorthand for describing the particularities of Black life. Blackness exists on one side of the color line, though which side is often unclear.

Black artists have to both find and fix the color line, no matter how ambiguous its parameters seem, whether the marketplace, art world discourse or the world wide web. DuBois describes this phenomenon as double-consciousness, a "twoness; an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder."

The field of discourse called Postmodernism accepts this fragmentation. The contemporary trades "two warring ideals in one dark body" for what poet Kevin Young describes as a "living, fighting, breathing body of work." DuBois asks how it feels to be a problem. Ol' Dirty Bastard says "If I got a problem, a problems got a problem til it's gone."

I'm interested in the tension between conventional, segregated channels of distribution and black imagination. I believe that amphiboly—in the form of code-switching, the practice of alternating between dialect and "standard" English—drives black thought. Poet Elizabeth Alexander paints the black interior as "a metaphysical space beyond the black public everyday toward power and wild imagination that black people ourselves know we possess but need to be reminded of."

If we understand manufacturing as a process or context that provides repetition, then mass media allows for narratives—and subsequently, ideologies and typologies—to be industrialized. "Prosthetic memory," our publicly circulating store of images, texts, and sounds, is made possible by this technology. How do digital networks and software platforms shape the collective imagination?

The sculpture pictured here by Houston-based artist Nathaniel Donnett refers to the "I Am A Man" signs originally seen in Memphis during the 1968 sanitation workers strike for better conditions. The original phrasing is appropriated and adapted to make a wry point about the formation of mass black personhood within new media. The title, "How Can You Love Me And Hate Me At The Same Time?," is suggestive of a DuBoisian twoness.

The color line has birthed the digital divide, another mythic border that shadows our work. If we are using technology, it's to "waste time." You know, talk to friends, watch movies, play games, listen to music. In 4chan parlance, black and brown people are "doing it wrong" when it comes to technology. As scholar Lisa Nakamura explains in her book "Digitizing Race," the rhetoric surrounding the so-called divide dismisses black creativity and incorrectly frames people of color as "unsophisticated, uneducated and stuck in a pre-technological past." But we've always done it wrong by the metric of white authentication. See jazz, rock n' roll, hip hop, nail art, braids, breakdancing, and the misuse of the word "crunk" for a few examples.

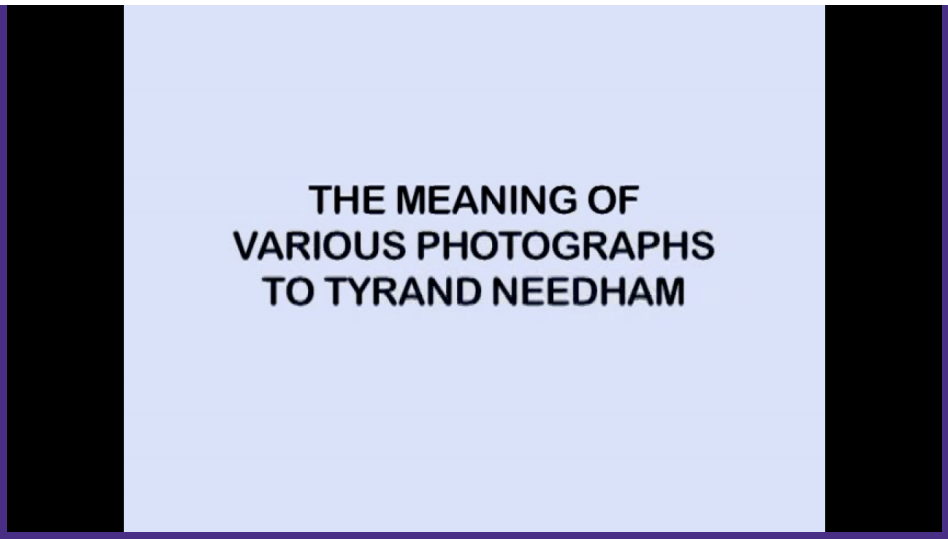
We don't need validation. The genesis of black new media isn't acceptance, but activity. Black expression is much more than a replacement of, or reaction to dominant culture. It's an integral part of American culture. I'm going to do a close reading of several artworks that interrogate the notion of a digital divide by exploring the black vernacular with new media.

This is a still from conceptual artist John Baldessari's 1973 piece called "The Meaning of Various News Photos to Ed Henderson." Using Portapak video—an only recently available technology—Baldessari recorded his friend Ed Henderson interpreting a series of eight photographs clipped from the newspaper.

Of this video, Baldessari wrote:

"For most of us, photography stands for the truth. But a good artist can make a harder truth by manipulating forms. It fascinates me how I can manipulate the truth so easily by the way I juxtapose opposites or crop the image or take it out of context."

Inspired by Baldessari, New York based artist Steffani Jemison created "The Meaning of Various Photographs to Tyrand Needham" in 2009. Here's an excerpt from Jemison's 12-minute video.



[Video playing]

Like Baldessari Jemison uses found images, but hers are ripped from Google—which alludes to a hypotext, the search term. Needham is presented with images of Rudy Fleming, the aforementioned Memphis sanitation workers' strike, funk band Earth, Wind & Fire, TV on The Radio, Tommie Smith and John Carlos at the 1968 Olympics, a stock photo of an African boy climbing a tree, 2001 Cincinnati riots following the murder of Timothy Thomas, producer/rapper Kanye West, a still from Charles Burnett's 1977 film "Killer of Sheep, a stock photo of an African boy playing soccer, and rapper Slim Thug.

What terms did Jemison search to gather these images? “Black,” “black male,” “black boy,” “black boys,” “black men,” are a few that spring to mind. Pictured are the results for “black man.”

“The Meaning of Various Photographs to Tyrand Needham” operates within a specific moral and ethical framework founded on a harder truth, or a troof, t-r-o-o-f.

In his book On The Blackness of Blackness, Young writes “the counterfeit is a literary tool that fictionalizes a black ‘troof.’… Since even fact-based, ‘objectively scientific truth’ has been used to oppress black people and their authors, their authors have often sought counterfeit or fiction or alternate realities.”

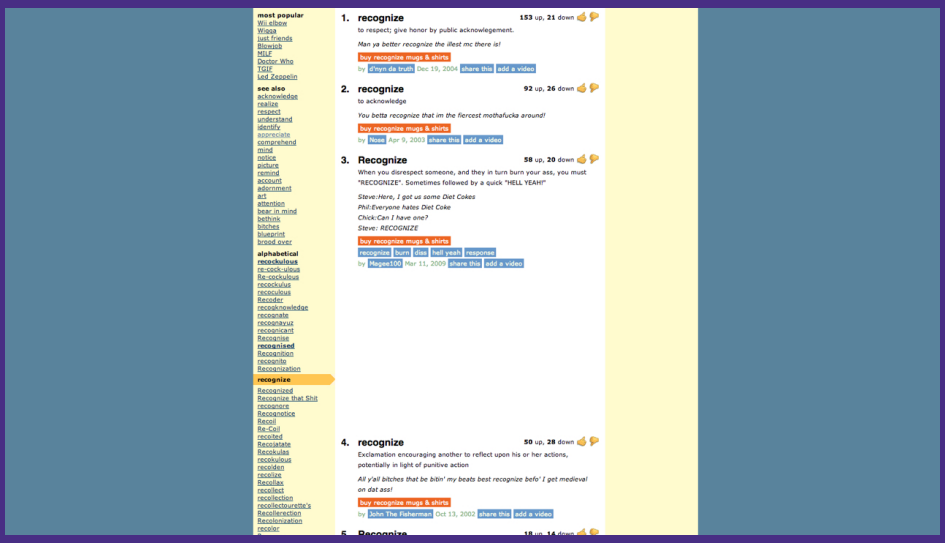
Tyrand Needham uses the counterfeit as he identifies the various photographs.

Needham’s description of this historic image:

“What I see here, look like somebody gettin’ ready for an Olympic game. There’s three males, one caucasian, two African-Americans. The two African-Americans are holding up their fists, like, um, black power. They have on gloves. One guy got a boombox in his hand or a very small television. The caucasian guy in front, or all of ‘em have on medals, and, uh, the two guys in the back have

numbers on their jackets. I can't really tell where they're by, but it's night time."

We can't tell if our protagonist is sincere in his humorous misreadings of cultural moments. Or perhaps he's not "mis-reading," but a denying. A participation in what Kevin Young calls the "African American tradition of negation as affirmation." Bad is good. Rudy Fleming's sobbing is reimagined as happiness, with Soulja Boy playing in the background. Happiness redefined as mortality.



Needham is recognizing. I mean this both in the traditional sense of identification, acknowledgment and appreciation; and in the dialect definition of respect. Needham's refusal hints at the ways that blackness defines itself in absence. What is most interesting about this piece is what's left unspoken. Agency is borne out of this silence. This power creates black people who, as poet Kalamu Ya Salaam explains, "[recognize] no higher earthly authority than ourselves." Jemison's work challenges the master narrative, giving storytelling authority to a different figure than that which is "normative."

Hennessy Youngman is the alter ego of New York based artist Jayson Musson. Hennessy Youngman aka Henrock Obama aka The Pharaoh Hennessy aka Henrock the Monarch is a behatted, bechained, beCoogi-ed hip hop personality who helps "The Internet" traverse the contemporary art world through the sharp criticism of his YouTube series "Art Thoughtz."

Here's the episode, "How to Make an Art."

[Video playing]

Though Hennessy says plenty there is also a silence to the performance. The appeal of Art Thoughtz hinges on the fact that a real Hennessy can't exist in the art world. It's a spoof. Curator Naomi Beckwith explains to the New York

Times, “Everyone sees it as a real, critical performance, and a lot of that is because most of his audience is right here in the art world. They get it. They understand that the character that’s speaking shouldn’t have access to that knowledge, so therefore there must be some kind of subterfuge going on.” In the art world, Musson isn’t conflated with Hennessy because the character is within the bounds of a conceptual performance.

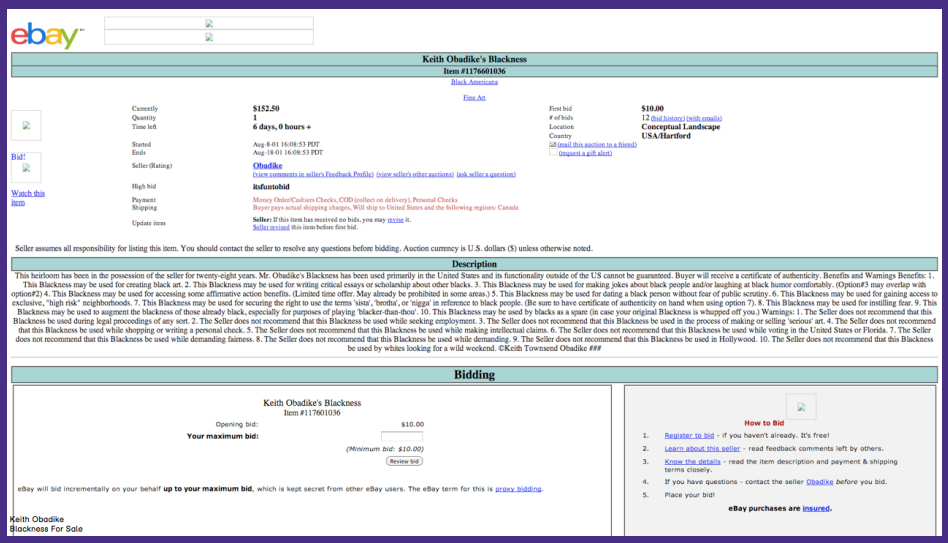
In a text on literacy, Jemison discusses the “pervasiveness of ‘excess’ and ‘lack’ as metaphors for the success or failure of black expression.” Musson’s “excessive” character revels in “insufficient speech.” Musson’s character also epitomizes what Jemison describes as the “redundancy and accumulation that define the internal logic of hip hop.” Each Art Thoughtz video builds on the previous one. As Hennessy Youngman, Musson creates a diegesis through exegesis. Mussons builds a fictional universe by explaining the art world to a congregation of viewers. Musson’s “Internet” reminds me of comedian Bernie Mac’s “America”—the virtual audience that was called on so much that it had to respond.

In an episode of the podcast Lexicon Valley linguist Walter Wofram is asked if Black English is a dialect or a language. Wolfram responds: “I think the way we need to approach it is to admit the truth about dialects, that in certain contexts speaking African-American Vernacular has clear advantages. In other contexts it has clear limitations. We need to get to a position where we’re not simply saying you need to talk right, but saying you need to be sensitive to the different situations in which language is used and how you may be perceived in those different situations.”

Hennessy Youngman willfully ignores Wolframs advice. He uses dialect to take control of art world discourse. Youngman refuses to code-switch. He keeps the act in

mixed company, whether speaking at a museum or in an interview with Art in America. Musson's YouTube activity prompts a deluge of hateful comments that he responds to in character. His voicing of an absent figure invites a slippage between Musson and Youngman. Some viewers mistake his black mask for a face, like journalist Dan Duray who wrote a problematic feature on Musson with the clickbait title: "Henny From the Block: Jayson Musson Is Not an Idiot, He Just Plays One on YouTube." In the profile, Duray critiques Hennessy's excessiveness, calling the cadence "over-the-top thug speak." Duray also comments on Musson's real speaking voice which (according to him) "sounds like Hennessy imitating a white person," and notes that Musson self-identifies as "West Indian."

Duray has clear idea of what blackness look and sounds like, but he doesn't seem to understand its meaning.



Keith Obadike's Blackness
Item #1176601036

Black Americana

Fine Art

Currently	$152.50	First bid	$10.00
Quantity	1	# of bids	12 (bid history) (with emails)
Time left	6 days, 0 hours +	Location	Conceptual Landscape
		Country	USA/Hartford
Started	Aug-8-01 16:08:53 PDT	(email this auction to a friend)	
Ends	Aug-18-01 16:08:53 PDT	(request a gift alert)	
Seller (Rating)	Obadike (view comments in seller's Feedback Profile) (view seller's other auctions) (ask seller a question)		
High bid	isfuntobid		
Payment	Money Order/Cashiers Checks, COD (collect on delivery), Personal Checks		
Shipping	Buyer pays actual shipping charges, Will ship to United States and the following regions: Canada		
Update item	Seller: If this item has received no bids, you may revise it. Seller revised this item before first bid.		

Bid! Watch this item

Seller assumes all responsibility for listing this item. You should contact the seller to resolve any questions before bidding. Auction currency is U.S. dollars ($) unless otherwise noted.

Description

This heirloom has been in the possession of the seller for twenty-eight years. Mr. Obadike's Blackness has been used primarily in the United States and its functionality outside of the US cannot be guaranteed. Buyer will receive a certificate of authenticity. Benefits and Warnings Benefits: 1. This Blackness may be used for creating black art. 2. This Blackness may be used for writing critical essays or scholarship about other blacks. 3. This Blackness may be used for making jokes about black people and/or laughing at black humor comfortably. (Option#3 may overlap with option#2) 4. This Blackness may be used for accessing some affirmative action benefits. (Limited time offer. May already be prohibited in some areas.) 5. This Blackness may be used for dating a black person without fear of public scrutiny. 6. This Blackness may be used for gaining access to exclusive, "high risk" neighborhoods. 7. This Blackness may be used for securing the right to use the terms 'sista', 'brotha', or 'nigga' in reference to black people. (Be sure to have certificate of authenticity on hand when using option 7). 8. This Blackness may be used for instilling fear. 9. This Blackness may be used to augment the blackness of those already black, especially for purposes of playing 'blacker-than-thou'. 10. This Blackness may be used by blacks as a spare (in case your original Blackness is whupped off you.) Warnings: 1. The Seller does not recommend that this Blackness be used during legal proceedings of any sort. 2. The Seller does not recommend that this Blackness be used while seeking employment. 3. The Seller does not recommend that this Blackness be used in the process of making or selling 'serious' art. 4. The Seller does not recommend that this Blackness be used while shopping or writing a personal check. 5. The Seller does not recommend that this Blackness be used while making intellectual claims. 6. The Seller does not recommend that this Blackness be used while voting in the United States or Florida. 7. The Seller does not recommend that this Blackness be used while demanding fairness. 8. The Seller does not recommend that this Blackness be used while demanding. 9. The Seller does not recommend that this Blackness be used in Hollywood. 10. The Seller does not recommend that this Blackness be used by whites looking for a wild weekend. ©Keith Townsend Obadike ###

Bidding

Keith Obadike's Blackness
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Opening bid: $10.00
Your maximum bid:
(Minimum bid: $10.00)
Review bid

eBay will bid incrementally on your behalf **up to your maximum bid**, which is kept secret from other eBay users. The eBay term for this is proxy bidding.

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4. If you have questions - contact the seller Obadike *before* you bid.
5. Place your bid!

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Keith Obadike
Blackness For Sale

What does blackness mean?

Keith Obidake proposes a few answers in his 2001 project "Blackness for sale," in which he auctioned his blackness on eBay. The auction was scheduled for ten days, but was closed after four because the item was deemed "inappropriate for listing." The project is now archived on Obidake's website.

The auction received 12 bids and reach a peak of $152.50. The auction had no photo, but contained the following description:

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"Blackness For Sale" explores how identity functions online. Though talk of "colorblindness" once dominated conversations about digital spaces, artists and scholars have done great work debunking the idea. From the white flight from Myspace to Facebook, to use of the #section8 when Instagram opened up to the Android platform, to the media's preoccupation with "Black Twitter" the internet is racial and economic.

Obidake created this piece to comment on the colonialist narrative that exists online and to examine "black people's position within that narrative." In an interview with artist/activist Coco Fusco he explains, "There are browsers called Explorer and Navigator that take you to explore the Amazon or trade in the eBay."

The absurdity of "Blackness For Sale" forces us to think about the ways that blackness is already for sale. The auctioning of blacks during slavery comes to mind, but also the annual NBA and NFL drafts. I think of Django and Shaft, and other sweet sweet badasses; Will Smith and Denzel Washington's transcendent blackness; Beyoncé and Jay-Z's aspirational blackness; Michael Jordan and Michael Jackson's impossible blackness; Obama's exceptional blackness. I think of the black church and the black vote, the black belt and the black bottom. I think of Soul Glo and soul.

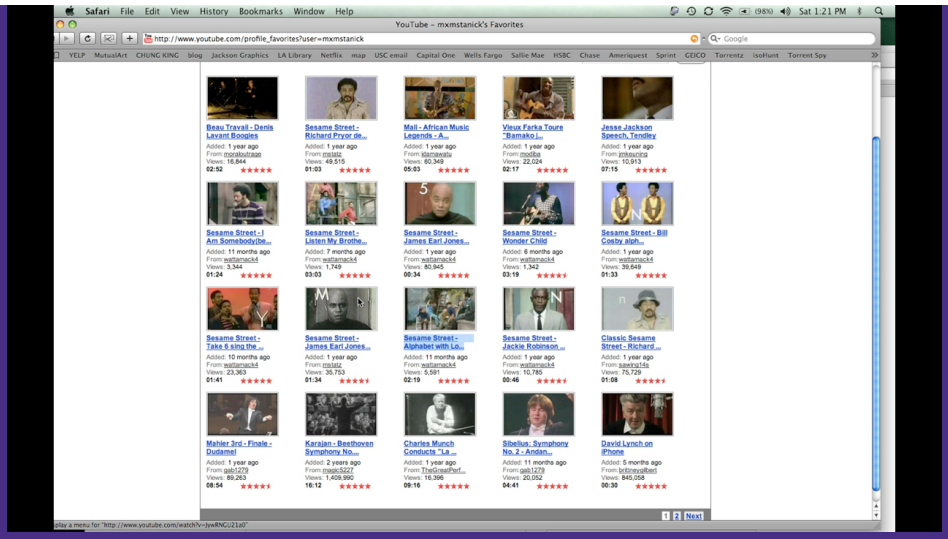
To quote Funkadelic:

"What is soul? I don't know! Soul is a ham hock in your corn flakes. What is soul? I don't know! Soul is ashy ankles and rusty kneecaps! What is soul? I don't know! Soul is the ring around your bathtub! What is soul? Soul is you, baby. Soul is you!"

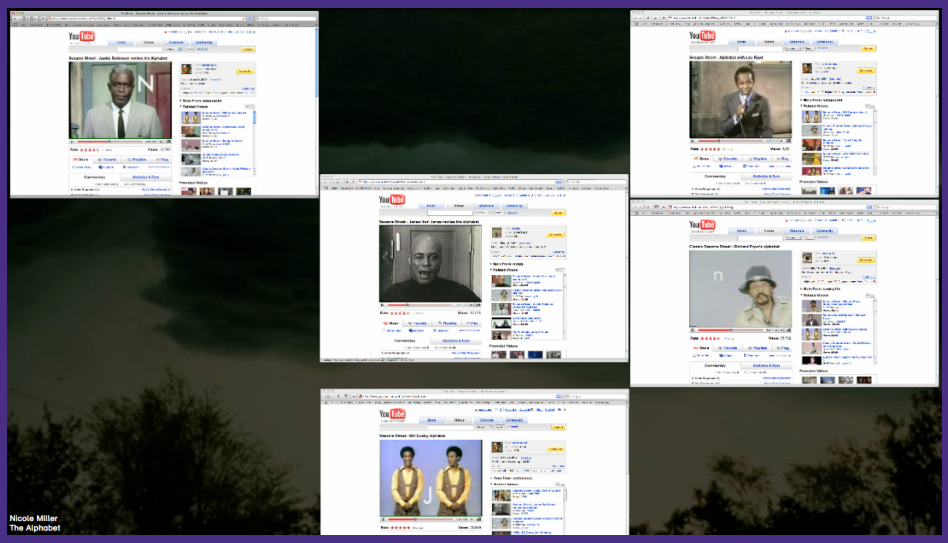
Writer Rebecca Walker describes blackness, specifically Black Cool, as "an ineffable aesthetic" that can be "traced back to a place, a people, and a culture." Black influence is everywhere in American culture, but often accused of being unknown and unknowable. But I know it when I see it.

How do we know what we know? Where did we learn how to be black? Can you fail to learn, as certain relatives think I did? Can you unlearn?

Los Angeles based artist Nicole Miller investigates this epistemology in her video "The Alphabet".



[Video playing]



Miller's use of the screencast is similar to Cindy Sherman's depiction of the shutter release in her early photographs. In Sherman's "Untitled Film Still" series you can see her holding this device, a feminist gesture that confirmed and visualized her autonomy in crafting the image. Miller is painting herself a "subject of interactivity." Though she is also the "object of interactivity," as well the "producer/artist," "spectator/owner," due to the interactive nature of the video.

On screen we see Miller on Safari, retrieving several videos from her "favorites." She uses her digital visual capital to look at YouTube videos. Just like Pew Research

Center told us she would! Splayed across her desktop in Exposé view Miller presents clips of Bill Cosby, James Earl Jones, Richard Pryor, Lou Rawls and Jackie Robinson reciting the alphabet on the television show Sesame Street.

"The Alphabet" isn't about blackness; it is blackness. Each man performs blackness as an entertainer and Miller performs blackness as a spectator. The men in the video use different forms of expression—comedy, drama, soul and sport—to transform the alphabet. It doesn't matter if they are pronouncing the letters "correctly," they are getting to a greater truth.

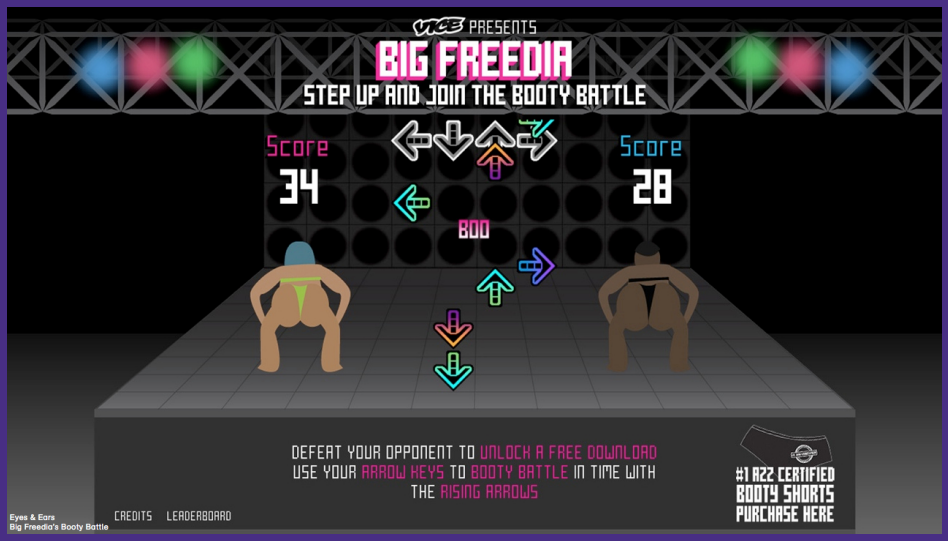
In an essay advocating the use of Black English poet June Jordan wrote:

"Language is the naming of experience and, thereby, the possession of experience. Language makes possible a social statement of connection that can lead into social reality. For all these reasons, language is political. Power belongs to the ones who have the power to determine the use, abuse, rejection, definition/re-definition of the words–the messages–we must try and send to each other."

"The Alphabet" expresses the language of language. Miller's piece captures the way in which black performers named our experience within the theater of pop. Her video asserts the "the mundane," which theologian Scott Cowan designates as "the most dynamic social force at work within a community."

Capitalism would lead us to believe that buying and selling is the most important activity of our lives. I've been talking about fine art, but I want to expand these ideas to commerce. It's obvious here at the festival, but the internet is a commercial context. It's a market that's influenced by the same discriminatory distribution

practices that dominate film, television and other culture industries.



Here is a screenshot of Big Freedia's Booty Battle, a Dance-Dance-Revolution-style HTML5 game created for the NOLA Bounce Queen Diva by the agency Eyes & Ears. The object of the game is simple, use your keyboard to shake that ass. May the best booty win.

I've seen Freedia live and her performance is a fun, raucous, high-energy event. She has incredibly talented backup dancers that make you want to move. Freedia's shows feature a Booty Battle in which members of the audience are pulled onto the stage and directed to make their booty whop. Although Booty Battles are common at Bounce shows, Freedia has brought this activity to the mainstream through her crossover success.

Unlike some of the other Bounce musicians in her native New Orleans, Freedia's audience is racially mixed. For most of Freedia's two hour show my eyes were glued to the stage. Her dancers are truly fantastic. I was dancing and shouting the lyrics and generally having a good time, but I kept hearing this guy a few feet away from me happily shouting "Dance, you black bitch. Shake your black ass" at one of the dancers.

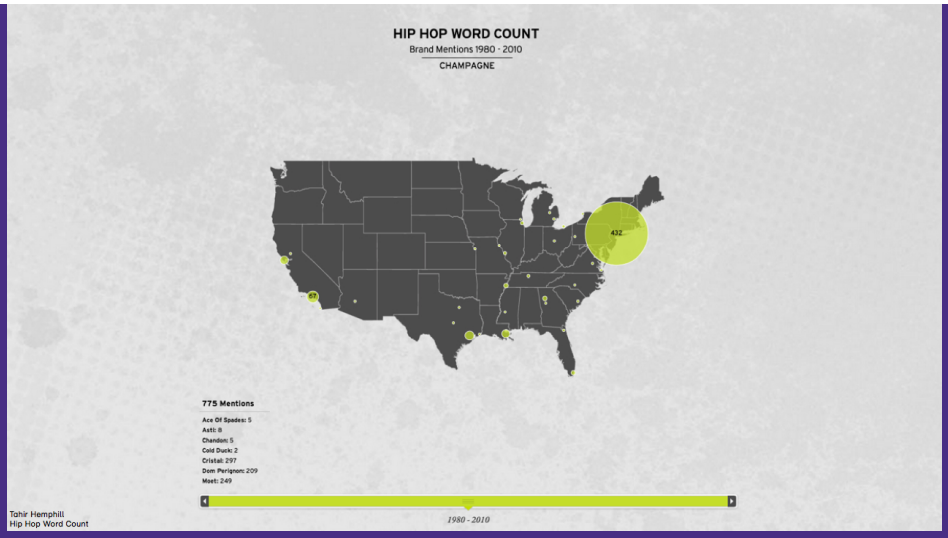
To the untrained ear those might sound a lot like actual Big Freedia lyrics, but they aren't. The scene made me uncomfortable in the same "white-guy-laughing-too-loud" way that made Dave Chappelle quit television.

Big Freedia's Booty Battle also makes me feel this way.

Cultural production is often underwritten by advertising, an industry not known for diversity. Eyes & Ears built in four avatars that each represent a different "demographic," but booty is black. I'm claiming it. Yet the game is exclusively presented by Vice, a media company dedicated to what I'll generously describe as an examination of contemporary whiteness.

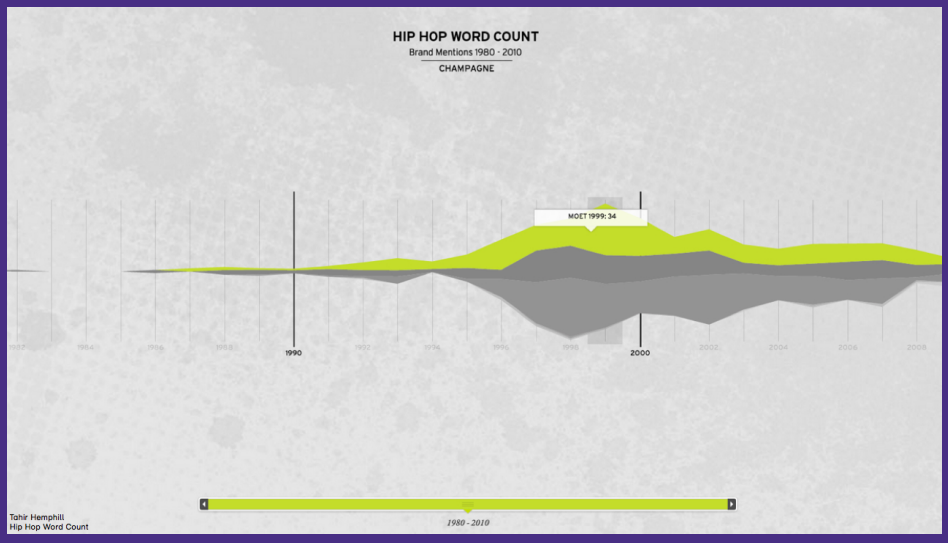
Does new media provide more opportunities for Black artists? Popular culture has been churning out the same images of blackness for over eighty years. Freedia's booty poppin' isn't much different than Josephine Baker's. This image sells, but only because it was borne out of discriminatory distribution practices.

Can the people who build the web—all of us here at SXSW—visualize Freedia's oeuvre in a new way? Despite all the "coding" fervor of the past year, regular people don't typically have the access, skills, or resources to restructure the Internet. The web has the potential to disrupt the legacy of conventional distribution, but only if we build it. The question isn't *if* we can build it, nor do I doubt that we have the imagination— the challenge is do we have the courage to create what we imagine even if it doesn't exist yet. Those who know how to code the programs, need to commit to recode the images. As Anil Dash recently tweeted, "I hope the tech community will stop saying DISRUPT ALL THE THINGS without addressing the communities we fail to serve."

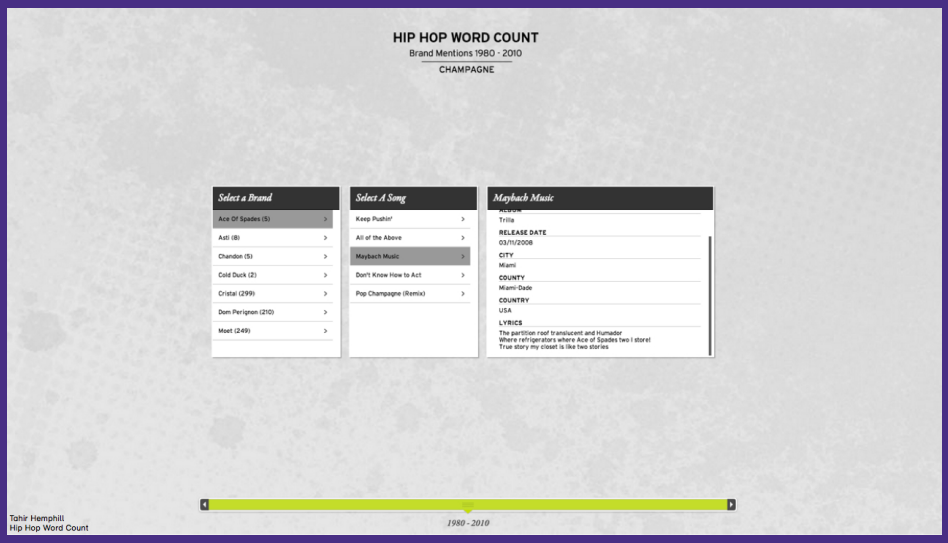


In 2011, strategist Tahir Hemphill released The Hip Hop Word Count a "searchable ethnographic database built from the lyrics of over 40,000 Hip-Hop songs from 1979 to present day. The Hip-Hop Word Count logs the time and location of "every metaphor, simile, cultural reference, phrase, meme and socio-political idea used in the corpus of Hip-Hop." Hemphill began the project because he was tired of having no tool to learn "which rapper had the smartest songs?" Or "Which city's rap songs use the most monosyllabic words?" The Hip Hop Word counts charts the language of Hip Hop music.

Pictured here is a browser-based data visualization of all mentions of Champagne by U.S. rappers between 1980 and 2010. This is the Map View.



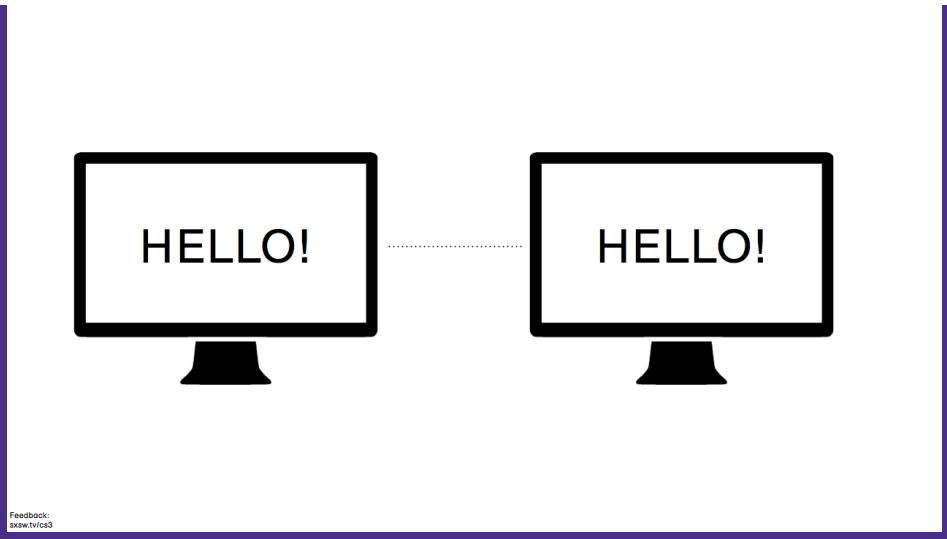
This is the Graph view.



This is the song view.

Temphill explains that the graphic illustrates a "nuanced story of Rapper's relationship" to Champagne—an "aspirational product"–and therefore, to the The American Dream.

Though I'm curious about the methodology behind the data, the Hip Hop Word Count is the first exhaustive, public project that considers the hybridization of speech and writing in Hip Hop. Hip Hop has had an undeniable influence on globalized, popular culture over the last thirty years. Not only has its aesthetic migrated internationally, but according to linguist John McWhorter, "Black English, especially the cadence, is becoming America's youth lingua franca."



Using Jordan's configuration of power as those who "determine the use, abuse, rejection, definition" of words, Black Power is literary. Of course, black power encompasses many things. Amphiboly— defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as "a quibble"—empowers black people. It let's us force two fighting ideas together. Code-switching liberates us. Our once "alternate system of…currency and value," has been merged with mass culture. The way that Black literacy has always encompassed nonliterary techniques like performance and orality are uniquely suited to thrive in televisual formats like the web. Black creators and audiences have understood how to use double entendre, politics, incongruity and polyphony in making meaning.

Can "blackness" as an aesthetic quality be expressed on screen? The essentialist in me thinks that a thing is black if a black person makes it, but experience tells that's it's black when black people name it as such. We recognize it in dialect, symbol and rhythm. Blackness can be read from a number of positions, whether collective as in Nicole Miller's "The Alphabet" or contextual as in The Hip Hop Word Count. Yet this proliferation of meanings doesn't render the concept meaningless. Multivalence is a blueprint for building the web and other large networks.

Given this radical, black tradition of hyperliteracy I propose a recasting of black “users” as “readers.” This is why I named my design studio Dominica Publishing. I want to make the popular web more like books—cumulative, eclectic, edited, artful. I care about the reader. The reader is always an individual, alone, awash in blue light staring at a screen. My work is for the reader. I want the web to be worth her time.

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