

COMM498A: Black Discourse and Digital Communication

Credits: 3

Instructor: Dr. Rianna Walcott

Pronouns: She/Her/Hers

Email: rwalcott@umd.edu

Class Meets: [REDACTED]

Location: [REDACTED]

Dr Walcott's Office Hours: [REDACTED]

Course Description:

In this course, we will explore the history of Black discourse and orality and how the unique communicative traditions of African diasporic people in the U.S., were formed in relation to technological skill. In this process, we will discuss how the parallel development of racism and Black cultural traditions have equipped Black users to wield digital technology skills in ways that often outpace and differ from the dominant group. We will then interrogate manifestations of this use by reading/exploring digital technologies and academic writings about them. Students will investigate the different mechanisms by which communication researchers can study Black users and discourse (social scientific, interpretive and critical methods) with a specific emphasis on critical cultural studies methods and digital humanities tools. Finally, we will together design a digital artifact that demonstrates our increased knowledge on the subject and makes this knowledge accessible to a public of our choosing.

This course will ask many of us to think about communication and culture in ways that are different than we may previously have approached either of these topics. We will be focused on the communicative practices and technology use of the Black community both in the U.S. and beyond, in the broader Black diaspora. By necessity, we will explore concepts like race, gender, power, and class. We will also engage deeply with Black cultural expression making sure that earnest academic inquiry guides our discussion.

At the end of the course, students are expected to be able to:

- (1) Be confident in their ability to summarize and respond to academic texts in the fields of black studies and communication
- (2) Analyze platform affordances as a part of the study of online discourse
- (3) Utilize key concepts and theories from black studies and communication to analyze black digital rhetorical and communicative practices online.
- (4) Produce a digital artifact suitable for an audience outside of the classroom

Required Resources:

All required texts will be posted on ELMS. Check ELMS weekly for updates on the readings.

Assignments

Participation (20%)

*To aid in our class discussion and ensure we are all prepared to engage, students are also required to submit to the class discussion board one question for discussion and/or prompts for engagement for each assigned reading before the start of the second class session (i.e., by close of day **Wednesday** ahead of Thursday's class). At the end of each week, (i.e., by close of day **Sunday**) students will submit any in-class activities to ELMs.*

Synthesise and respond (30%)

*Academic writing can sometimes be dense. Even more often it is difficult to remember what articles are about even a short time after reading. More challenging still is the ability to read articles as being in conversation with one another and to find a way to enter the conversation ourselves. This assignment asks that you submit a **750w** response for each quarter of the course.*

Students will read the assigned articles/ chapters, and based on their reading as well as class discussion, they will create a response that includes:

- *a summary of the key ideas;*
- *an explanation of key concepts and terms;*
- *any important examples or applications used to aid understanding and the student's analysis of the readings;*
- *and the student's own response to this topic area.*

*This analysis should not be a grade or opinion about how good or bad the articles are, rather it should demonstrate how the student understands and sees the work fitting into the context of our class' subject area and how they see application for the material within and outside of the classroom. **An example is provided on ELMS for review.***

Group artifact and presentations (50%)

What we learn in the classroom is only as important as how we apply it to our lives, work, and thoughts outside the classroom. Therefore, in addition to studying the uses of digital technology, students will become producers of a digital artifact meant to translate their learning to an audience outside the classroom. Students may select among a pre-approved artifact or propose their own ideas. Students may decide to work individually or in teams of 4-5 to propose, produce and present their artifact. Some examples of a digital artifact suitable for this class may be a podcast, a blog, a storymap, or a digital video.

*Each artifact will begin with a **500 word proposal per artifact** which includes an argument for the platform chosen/proposed audience. Along with submission of the digital artifact, students will **individually** submit either a **1500w** final paper, **podcast, video presentation** or similar (agreed with me ahead of time) that explores the decisions made in designing the product, as well as how the literature we read in the class contributes to the project design and content for their selected audience.*

Assignment Guidelines

If you plan to miss class the day that an assignment is due, please still submit it on ELMS by the due date. If you miss class due to a medical or other emergency and cannot submit the assignment on time, please contact me as soon as possible.

You must type and double space your assignments, number each page, set the margins to one inch, use Times New Roman 12-point font, [Harvard referencing](#), and include a proper heading.

All assignments must be **uploaded to ELMS as a PDF, .doc, or .docx.**

Remember to proofread your assignment before submitting it!

You must cite your sources using the Harvard style guide. If you neglect to properly cite your sources your grade will be negatively affected.

Late Assignments

Course assignments are expected to be submitted to ELMS by the listed due date. Late assignments are penalized an initial 10% after the due date has passed and will be penalized an additional 10% for each calendar day that they are late. Late assignments will be accepted up to five calendar days after the initial due date as listed on ELMS. Please note that university-excused absences will not result in grade penalties. Students should reach out to course instructors to discuss accommodations.

Expectations and Grading Procedures

For every assignment in the class, feedback in advance of submission is possible via office hour consultation with the instructor. Where students participate in a group assignment, their work will be graded as a whole. Student's grades will be available on ELMS. All questions regarding grades should be addressed during office hours/by appointment. Calculation errors may be addressed via email.

Final letter grades are assigned based on the percentage of total assessment points earned. To be fair to everyone I have to establish clear standards and apply them consistently, so please understand that being close to a cutoff is not the same as making the cut (89.99 \neq 90.00).

Undergraduate	
Synthesize and Respond	300 points (100 points each)
Participation	260 points
In-class activities	(130 points, 10 points each)
Discussion Questions	(130 points, 10 points each)
Digital Artifact	440 points
Artifact proposal (1 per group)	(70 points)
Final Product and Individual response	(300 points total, product out of 100, response out of 200)
Presentation	(70 points)

Final Grade Cutoffs									
+	97.00%	+	87.00%	+	77.00%	+	67.00%		
A	94.00%	B	84.00%	C	74.00%	D	64.00%	F	<60.00%
-	90.00%	-	80.00%	-	70.00%	-	60.00%		

Course Communication

This course uses ELMS and email regularly. All course documents, information, grades, and readings will be available on ELMS. Please make sure your email information with UMD is up-to-date so that you can receive all relevant information.

You are responsible for receiving information sent through ELMS and email. My preferred method of contact for short clarifying questions is email. However, be sure to first check the syllabus and schedule as the answers to many questions can be found in these documents. I return emails during business hours M-F and variably on the weekend depending on how my work/life balance is doing at any given time.

For extended questions and feedback on assignments, grades, and readings you are encouraged to visit me during my office hours - please try to email me if you intend to attend, but drop-ins are welcome. If you are unable to attend my office hours due to a course clash, please contact me in good time so we can schedule an alternative meeting time. If you are then unable to attend this meeting (emergencies happen!) please email me **AT LEAST TWO HOURS** in advance of the agreed upon meeting time. If you do not do this and I make the journey to campus to meet you for no reason I will be **very cross**.

Classroom Policies

Disruptive behavior will not be tolerated. If any student is disruptive or disrespectful and continues to be so after one warning, they will be asked to leave. If this occurs, the student will receive an unexcused absence for the day and **must meet with me before they are allowed to return to class**. Additional disruptions will then be reported to the Office of Student Conduct. All students are expected to conform to the Code of Student Conduct.

The various backgrounds and identities that we have in the classroom is a strength and these different identities can be a powerful asset in our seminar discussions. The classroom and the university is a political space – who we are, what we learn, where and how we learn it is all *political*. We will show respect for all ethnicities, sexualities, genders, (dis)abilities, languages, religions, political ideologies, socioeconomic class or national affiliation – **with extra attention to those that are traditionally marginalized in society**. We should ensure that our speech and behavior does not make any people in these groups feel uncomfortable or excluded : each student should feel equally comfortable, included and have equal learning opportunities in the class. We should pay attention to the fact that belonging to one or several of the above identity groups may not be immediately obvious to us. Please feel encouraged to talk to me if you have ever been made uncomfortable or to feel excluded in class, or just ask and I'll signpost you to where you need!

Course Schedule - subject to change with written notice from the instructor.

Week	Date	Topic	Read	Due
1	1/26	Course Introduction: Syllabus and Class Expectations	Syllabus	
2	1/31	Histories of (Black) Networked Communication	Fouché, R. (2006). Say it loud, I'm black and I'm proud: African Americans, American artifactual culture, and black vernacular technological creativity. <i>American Quarterly</i> , 58(3), 639-661.	

	2/2		Warner-Lewis, M. (2000) "The oral tradition in the African diaspora," in Irele, F. A. and Gikandi, S. (eds) <i>The Cambridge History of African and Caribbean Literature</i> . Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 117–136. doi: 10.1017/CHOL9780521832755.008.	Discussion prompt
3	2/7	Networked Communication and the Black Diaspora	Sobande, F. (2020). Black Women's Digital Diaspora, Collectivity, and Resistance. In: <i>The Digital Lives of Black Women in Britain</i> . Palgrave Studies in (Re)Presenting Gender. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-46679-4_4	
	2/9		Dean, A. (2016) <i>Poor Meme, Rich Meme, Real Life</i> . Available at: https://reallifemag.com/poor-meme-rich-meme/	Discussion prompt
4	2/14	Black Discursive Practices	Gates, H. L. (1989). The signifying monkey: a theory of African-American literary criticism. Oxford: Oxford University Press. (excerpt pp 70-96)	
	2/16		Florini, S. (2014) 'Tweets, Tweeps, and Signifyin': Communication and Cultural Performance on "Black Twitter"', <i>Television & New Media</i> , 15(3), pp. 223–237. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476413480247 .	Discussion prompt, 2-3 Page response
5	2/21	Identity as performance	De Kosnik, A. (2019) 'Is Twitter a Stage?: Theories of Social Media Platforms as Performance Spaces', in A. De Kosnik and K.P. Feldman (eds) <i>#identity: Hashtagging Race, Gender, Sexuality, and Nation</i> . University of Michigan Press, pp. 20–36. Available at: http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvndv9md.5	
	2/23		Eden Litt (2012) Knock, Knock. Who's There? The Imagined Audience, <i>Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media</i> , 56:3, 330-345, DOI: 10.1080/08838151.2012.705195	Discussion prompt
6	2/28	Black Digital Publics	Squires, C. R. (2002), Rethinking the Black Public Sphere: An Alternative Vocabulary for Multiple Public Spheres. <i>Communication Theory</i> , 12: 446–468.	
	3/2		boyd, danah (2010) 'Social Network Sites as Networked Publics: Affordances, Dynamics, and Implications', in Z. Papacharissi (ed.) <i>A Networked Self: Identity, Community, and Culture on Social Network Sites</i> . Routledge, pp. 47–66. Available at: https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203876527-8 .	Discussion prompt
7	3/7	Digital Black Feminism	Steele, C. K. (2021). Digital black feminism. In <i>Digital Black Feminism</i> . New York University Press. Chapter 2	
	3/9		Gray-Denson, K. (2015) 'Race, Gender, and Virtual Inequality: Exploring the Liberatory Potential of Black Cyberfeminist Theory', in R.A. Lind (ed.) <i>Producing Theory in a Digital World 2.0</i> . New York, NY: Peter Lang, pp. 175–192.	Discussion prompt

			(Additional reading, not required) bruce, k., Walcott, R., Kihoro Mackay, K., Osei, K., lasade-anderson, t. and Sobande, F. (2022) Black feminist and digital media studies in Britain . <i>Feminist Media Studies</i> . DOI: 10.1080/14680777.2021.2006737	
8	3/14	Blackness and the Archive	Hall, Stuart. (2001). 'Constituting an archive.' <i>Third Text</i> 15(54): 89–92. https://doi.org/10.1080/09528820108576903 .	
	3/16		Meier, F. and Elsweler, D. (2018) "'Other Times It's Just Strolling Back Through My Timeline": Investigating Re-Finding Behaviour on Twitter and Its Motivations', in <i>Proceedings of the 2018 Conference on Human Information Interaction & Retrieval</i> . New York, NY, USA: Association for Computing Machinery (CHIIR '18), pp. 130–139. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1145/3176349.3176392 .	Discussion prompt, 2-3 Page response
Spring Break				
10	3/28	Digital Surveillance	The Great Hack IN CLASS VIEWING Fuchs, C. (2011). New Media, Web 2.0 and Surveillance. <i>Sociology Compass</i> 5(2): 134-147.	
	3/30			Discussion prompt
11	4/4	Algorithms and bias	Noble, S. U. (2018). Algorithms of oppression. In <i>Algorithms of Oppression</i> . New York University Press. Introduction Akpan, P. (2020a) <i>Shadow Banning: Who Is Affected?</i> , <i>Bustle</i> . Available at: https://www.bustle.com/life/what-is-shadow-banning-how-does-it-work (Accessed: 30 January 2023).	
	4/6		Akpan, P. (2020b) <i>What Is Shadow Banning & Why Does It Deserve Our Attention?</i> , <i>Bustle</i> . Available at: https://www.bustle.com/life/what-is-shadowbanning-and-how-does-it-work (Accessed: 30 January 2023).	Discussion prompt
12	4/11	Platform politics	Walcott, R. (2020). On Censorship. <i>Disegno #27</i> Jin, D.Y. (2013). The Construction of Platform Imperialism in the Globalization Era. <i>Triple C</i> , 11(1), 145-172	
	4/13			Discussion prompt
13	4/18	Harmful actors	Bailey, M. (2021). Introduction. In <i>Misogynoir Transformed</i> . New York University Press. Board, W.E. (2020) "'Intersectionality Went Viral": Toxic Platforms, Distinctive Black Cyberfeminism and	

	4/20		Fighting Misogynoir – An Interview with Kishonna Gray’, <i>Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture</i> , 15(1), pp. 68–73. Available at: https://doi.org/10.16997/wpcc.367 .	Discussion prompt, 2-3 Page response
14	4/25	Digital Activism	Ahmad Greene-Hayes & Joy James (2017) Cracking the Codes of Black Power Struggles: Hacking, Hacked, and Black Lives Matter	
	4/27		Tara L. Conley (2017) Decoding Black Feminist Hashtags as Becoming, <i>The Black Scholar</i> , 47:3, 22-32, DOI: 10.1080/00064246.2017.1330107	Discussion prompt
15	5/2	Digital methods	Brock, A. (2018) ‘Critical technocultural discourse analysis’, <i>New Media & Society</i> , 20(3), pp. 1012–1030. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444816677532 .	
	5/4	Digital methods practice	Brock, A. (2012). “From The Blackhand Side: Twitter as A Cultural Conversation.” <i>Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media</i> , 56, 529-549.	Discussion prompt
16	5/9	Finals Preparation and Course Wrap Up	Time to work on artifact in groups	
	5/11	Finals Preparation and Course Wrap Up		Artifact proposal due
Final Assignment		Wednesday May 17th 10.30am-12.30pm	Artifact, presentation, and paper due	
Extra credit opportunities		Throughout semester	Attend specific BCaT events, sign register, write 750w reflection, worth 20 points per event	