The comments from twenty Americanists that are included here, with many practical hyperlinks, weigh the benefits and drawbacks of digitalization and new technologies in our research and teaching. Search engines and browsing tools give teachers and students previously undreamed-of ways of quickly finding historical, literary, and multimedia sources, ranging from early American imprints, digitized runs of *Ebony*, and William Carlos Williams’s voice to extensive archives of photographs and sound recordings. That so many things are available (at least to those who have access to the relevant sites) can only be a first step toward learning, however, and that “the machine is always on” can be distracting and can also tempt us to rely more on digital tools rather than on our own brains (and the large world of the analogue). Instruments once believed to lead to democratization can be turned into tools of state surveillance and commercial data-mining. Novelty is not in itself a good, and it is telling that much of the new vocabulary, from “device” to “twitter,” is deeply rooted in the English language. Paradoxically, the more digital our academic environments become, the more urgently human critical thinking, in the best Americanist tradition, would seem to be needed.

“And all he knowed was tweet-tweet-tweet”
—Margaret Walker, “Bad-Man Stagolee” (1942)

PART ONE: “Out There”

As asked about the effects of new technologies in knowledge production, one immediately thinks of the many shortcuts to research results that have become available in the relatively short time span of about two or three decades. Card catalogues have become obsolete (and sadly were destroyed at many libraries and universities), as have photocopies of excerpts or phone calls to librarians to double-check bibliographic information.1 The book stacks in large research libraries have become far less crowded...
than they used to be, as digital catalogues may nowadays include shelf-browsing functions, not to mention many direct links to online texts and scanning requests for those texts that have not yet been digitized. Access to the existing scholarly literature on a given topic has been simplified, as consulting hundreds of tools, such as the Modern Language Association Bibliography or American Literary Scholarship, and assembling a bibliography can now be accomplished in minutes. Topics that once took ages to research (“Changing uses of the word ‘Puritan’ before 1930,” for example) can now be researched more or less instantly, as Ngram viewers generate a first quantitative overview and easily searchable textual data bases quickly help to create long lists of specific examples. While concordances to books or the whole oeuvre of an author are gathering dust, the search functions in digital texts are busy. Almost magically, music identifiers and image searches find the names of composers and their compositions or determine the titles of paintings. For Americanists specifically, vast digital archives, some of them interactive, are now available online on subjects ranging from the Boston Massacre of 1770 to the 2013 Boston bombing (to cite just two Boston-centered events as more or less random examples), or from the different versions of Walt Whitman’s Leaves of Grass to audiorecorded authorial comments and a full chronology for William Faulkner’s Absalom, Absalom! The American Writers Museum in Chicago provides an imaginative example of how even the experience of visiting a “brick and mortar” institution with its exhibition rooms and its real typewriters and books can be enhanced and transformed by audio, video, and interactive installations.

Publication of a book once went through the stages of copyedited manuscript, galleys, and page proofs, with handwritten corrections to be made in different-colored pencils, and texts that were entrusted to the mailing service took a long time to turn into books. Collaborations with colleagues in shared projects once generated an extraordinarily time-consuming correspondence. Now multiple authors can work on the same text simultaneously, even if they are located in different parts of the world, and the editor’s proofs may appear instantly on the author’s reading device, with the answers to editorial queries only a click away.

The effects of innovations in the classroom are equally dramatic. Going to class with copied handouts (I still remember blue-inked mimeographs), transparencies for an overhead slide projector, a cassette recorder, or, in my case, a wind-up 78 rpm record player for old spirituals or blues or requesting special classrooms in which film clips could be shown—all this has become superfluous in a new digital environment in which a thumb drive, or nothing but a link to some remarkably energy-hungry storage in the clouds, may provide all of the textual and audio-visual materials one may wish to use in a class. Students can get access to everything on their own devices and submit their own assignments digitally, too; in fact, they can now, at many universities, take online courses for very low fees, broadening the student population immensely.
But these students, while they have full exposure to all course materials, may have only virtual contact with the teacher and no contact at all with other students. Still, all of this does add up to a commendation one wishes to extend to the progress that has been made, thanks to inventions and their application to research and teaching in the past two decades.

II

What, if any, are the drawbacks of the new technologies? Here it is best to focus on the situation in the classroom. After equipping their classrooms for net-connectivity (at great expense), many institutions now create at least some rooms in which wireless local area networking and phone reception are blocked. Any teacher among the readers of this issue forum will know why. Instead of serving only as a valuable source of information that facilitates access to knowledge, the new technologies have also tended to distract students, who now engage in online conversations, follow the updates of their numerous digital friends and associates, check their mail, and browse the many news flashes and advertisements that reach them on their devices and that may prompt them to respond immediately with comments of their own, even if such comments may consist of nothing but a 👍 symbol. Some have become so enamored of the new technologies that using the term “addiction” is not an exaggeration in describing the state of mind of students who cannot last the duration of a class without checking what might have happened in their virtual world: sometimes they thinly disguise this addiction by pretending that they have to go to the bathroom two or three times during class. The new technologies may also inhibit casual conversations among the students. In the predigital age it was not uncommon for a teacher to enter a classroom and find students already engaged in discussing among themselves the readings they had done for that class meeting; nowadays each student is absorbed by his or her digital device, and the classroom remains quiet up to the last moment when the teacher breaks the ice and begins.

Is an increase in plagiarism one of the drawbacks? Plagiarism has traditionally been the most deadly of academic sins, yet it is a sin that has been committed again and again throughout the ages and detected only sporadically, often years or decades after the offense and at a time when the offenders may have reached high positions. Digital resources may have made plagiarizing harder to resist, as whole swaths of writing do not need to be copied by hand or retyped but can now be cut and pasted right out of a digital source. Yet should there really be more plagiarists now than in the past, the new technologies also make much easier the identification of plagiarism and have helped to identify some past plagiarizers. So here the record would seem to be neutral.

Students who use the new technologies to study may, however, fall victim to another danger, that of losing, or never acquiring, the distinction between reliable and unreliable sources. Searching a popular brows-
er for the energy consumption of its data storage, for example, leads to an inhouse praise of its support of renewable energy. Because anything can be found online, this distinction can easily get blurred—and perhaps today’s pedagogy should particularly focus on generating a critical eye in assessing digital resources. The sense that there is knowledge “out there” that can be summoned easily may also make at least some students less eager to acquire basic skills, like an internalized sense of historical dates. One is reminded of the passage in *Phaedrus* where Socrates tells the story of Theuth, the inventor of writing, who showed his invention to another god “who told him that he would only spoil men’s memories and take away their understandings.” Is the notion that having a written language reduces one’s capacity to remember or think even more applicable to today’s inventions, which assure us that answers to all questions are on a device, and hence do not need to be stored in our brains?

Furthermore, what is out there and algorithmically proven to be seen by many is often not the repository of the best scholarly wisdom but merely the winner of a popularity contest. The standard book on a given subject may be one that has neither been digitized nor received many “likes” at book vendors’ internet sites. Studying digitally also means not studying sources in their original materiality. This is taking Walter Benjamin’s *loss of aura* one step further, for it means working with digital copies of what were often already mechanically reproduced objects. Some historical newspapers and early American imprints, for example, were digitized not from books but from microfilmed versions of texts that include out-of-focus pages and an occasional sample of a microfilmer’s hair. How does one confront this double remove, this loss of direct contact with originals of any sort? Documents, works of art, even scholarly journals—what is a “page”?—all of these may become hazy in a student’s mind in the post-Gutenberg age we are living in.

One must mention the issue of cost among the drawbacks. Digital journal subscriptions and archives can be enormously costly, and those scholars and students who work outside of institutions with broad access to the best digital resources are at a serious disadvantage. The best digitized databases and scholarly literature for a given research project may indeed be out there, but also out of reach for the many. And this situation is, of course, even more dire for students and scholars in the poorer countries of the global south.

In the current political climate, what is out there and what our students are reading while not listening to a lecture may also be shrill and violent, encouraging exaggerations and coarseness in what students write and how they write it. The anonymous *vox populi* does not express itself the way Enlightenment thinkers may have imagined the *volonté générale*. Any reader has probably at least glanced at the vicious things that were said in the past by identity-sheltered commentators about Barack Obama (keyword “BHO”) or, at the present moment, about Donald Trump (with anonymous commentators in the *Washing-
ton Post regularly wishing him dead). This is just political hot air, some may object, and who cares about the people who hide behind web names like Catalogical, Pirate58, Great_White_Snark, Truthspinner, Paqrat, or “Bias Ignorance and Prejudice are Voluntary Acts”? Yet the sharp mode of discourse may be contagious, and the same venom can be found in comments on films, books, or even the 2019 T.S. Eliot poetry prize winner, comments that are not just bitter, cynical, and dismissive but so out of proportion to the occasion that some newspaper editors have had to hire “moderators” who police their comment sites and remove too blatantly offensive verbiage with an explanation such as the following: “This comment was removed by a moderator because it did not abide by our community standards. Replies may also be deleted.” Peter Szondi once argued that the crisis of modern drama at the end of the nineteenth century could be observed in the disintegration of intersubjective dialogues into monologues (87), and today, series of comments in online newspapers illustrate a similar phenomenon, that of real conversations deteriorating into “threads” of opinions.

Policing websites raises the specter of control, welcome in the case of threat threads that seem to have replaced letters to the editor in digital newspapers, but frightening in the realm of the free transmission of knowledge. This becomes clear in legal cases in which subpoenaing of e-mails (even deleted ones) yields evidence for the prosecution and raises the question of who owns our e-mails and under what circumstances they, or our course materials, or anything we do or search online, can be inspected or shared. Half a century ago, in his classic essay “Constituents of a Theory of the Media,” Hans Magnus Enzensberger argued that “Orwell’s bogey of a monolithic consciousness industry derives from a view of the media which is undialectical and obsolete. The possibility of total control of such a system at a central point belongs not to the future but to the past.” The strange quality of texts that are not texts, texts that we may buy and hold but that may not be “ours,” was driven home by the sudden withdrawal of George Orwell’s novel 1984 from reading devices, surprising some readers in the midst of reading the book they had purchased online. On the vendor’s site a readers’ discussion board was also removed. Public reactions expressed anger at the company’s decision to take away even the marginal annotations that readers had made, leading to a lawsuit. “Retailers of physical goods cannot, of course, force their way into a customer’s home to take back a purchase,” the New York Times commented, but distributors of digital texts could, indeed, delete purchased books en masse in such a striking, instant way. The irony that the book that had been deleted by a click from a control center was famous for its dystopian view of a future under “Big Brother” and its “memory hole,” in which the remembrance of people and events could be made to disappear, was not lost on the journalists who covered this episode of digital literacy. Does Orwell’s notion really belong only to the past?
III

Just as many educational institutions feel obliged, sometimes at the expense of library budgets, to keep their net environment up to date, so do the technicians hired to make that happen not only upgrade digital tools and equipment, but also constantly update and adjust their confusing terms for each novelty. I find striking the broad circulation of an ever-growing digital vocabulary, a by-product of the new technologies that always seem to stand in need of being named. If they are not simple brand names (any reader will know which ones I mean), or acronyms (AOL for “America on line,” IT for “information technology,” PDF for “portable document format,” or USB for “universal serial bus”), they come from metaphoric realms ranging from classical antiquity (Eureka, Trojans) to modern biology (virus, infection) and from the fantasy world of *Lord of the Rings* (trolls, Frodo-malware) to Nordic history (did you know that Bluetooth was the nickname of Danish King Harald I., who may have had bad teeth but who united different lands under his crown?). One may think that tech terminology is of mostly recent vintage, yet a good number of terms that are today begging to be re-learned and understood in their new technological meanings are often deeply rooted English words from the thirteenth century (handle, streaming), the fourteenth century (device, engine, tablet), the fifteenth century (digital, hardware, mobile), the sixteenth century (chat, computer, backdoor, network, platform, technology), the seventeenth century (data, twitter), the eighteenth century (cookie, password, software), the nineteenth century (grid, handshake, interface, tweet), all in use well before the neologisms of our own days emerged (e-mail, hashtag, hyperlink, laptop, pixel, smartphone). A predigital reader would probably have understood a sentence like the following differently from a contemporary digital native: “The barrier at the entrance to the site was so formidable that the troll was unable to get onto the platform and used a backdoor.”

Even *algorithm*, the term that seems to govern so much of our lives, has its historical patina as an Arabic word that was adapted to seventeenth-century English and defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as “the art of reckoning by cyphers,” inspiring the title of my remarks. The verb *google* first appeared in the early twentieth century as a term for a cricket ball’s unusual swerve. Literature also left its traces, with Jonathan Swift’s “Yahoos” and the neat “EUDORA” e-mail system that owed its name to Eudora Welty’s short story, “Why I Live at the P. O.” It was a system that permitted you to work offline and included spellcheck, but who remembers it now?

This reminds us that what is out there now may no longer be out there tomorrow. “Hyperlink” has been promoted to appear well above “footnote” under the “insert” command of some newly upgraded word-processing systems, but many links are not available everywhere, and
countless dead links in scholarly articles to no-longer-existing websites and digital resources demonstrate the poor life expectancy of such linked references that lead only to results like the mysterious “404 Not Found.” Appended dates at which these sites apparently still existed on the internet provide little comfort to a scholar who needs to verify a source.

Data storage systems and search engines come and go, and even the current issue of *Amerikastudien / American Studies* that you are now not holding in your hands, but reading on your device may be formatted in a way that will no longer be accessible to a reader in the future; I would not be surprised if the future for many of the links I have lavishly inserted into my remarks looked even more dismal. Be ready for dramatic changes at all times, is the motto of news articles about the digital world.

**PART TWO: Experiences with New Technologies Today**

In order to give readers somewhat broader perspectives on the issue of this forum, certainly fresher than what someone who remembers mimeographs and 78 rpm records might imagine, I asked younger (mostly Americanist) scholars, some of them former students of mine, to send me their views of the matter, and a number of them did. The following pages, therefore, reproduce (in some cases, with an added headline) their rich and heterogeneous comments, which reflect scholarly work and teaching experience in many different (but, by far, not all) areas and which include practical references and general insights, as well as profound worries. Their views on iPhones in the classroom or on the value of Google Books or YouTube vary considerably, but their accounts provide many new suggestions for using (or avoiding) new technologies in scholarship and teaching.

**The Highest of Highs and the Most Dispiriting of Lows**

—Hua Hsu, English and American Studies, Vassar College

As teachers and scholars, we are often encouraged to demonstrate a working knowledge of “new technologies.” For some, this means specialized tools that might assist in data mining and visualization, map-making or modeling, and browsing large digital repositories all in one fell swoop. But for many of us, this often means little more than asking students to compose Tweets or blog posts rather than response papers, moving our discussions onto online “threads” and forums. I have been in the classroom for a little over a decade, and the greatest impact of technology has been my students’ changing relationship with “owning” objects (books, mostly) as opposed to just renting or pirating them. Buying too many books is now seen as a financial burden, even in classes full of students who adore reading.
Given American Studies’ tendency toward reexamining its own objects of scrutiny, thematic impulses, and methods, it is inevitable and important that we consider how the shape and possibilities of American life have been reimagined through our access to new technological tools, from social media and online monopolies to the narrowing divide between art and commerce, politics and rage. But I am also interested in our everyday engagement with these possibilities—how we spend our time online, and what new stories can be told by drawing on these archives. Where once we regarded the beer can by the highway, we now have the infinite warehouses of eBay or Etsy—marketplaces which double as our most idiosyncratic folk libraries. Finding second-hand copies of very rare books online, for example, radically changed my book, *A Floating Chinaman*. They contained ephemera and markings that were missing in library copies. Instead of a public philosophy, there are comment sections and message boards—not so much counter-publics, but anti-publics. There are no longer definitive accounts of a single concert, but hundreds of handheld glimpses from the crowd. These small gestures cohere into a story about how technology has changed the definitions and parameters of citizenship and community. But they are also archives for study, pointing toward new modes of being, where the definition of “boredom” has changed, where the intensity of experience toggles between the highest of highs and the most dispiriting of lows. After all, who wants to watch a mediocre cat video?

Mobile Phones as Pedagogical Tools

—Raquel Kennon, Africana Studies, California State University, Northridge

New technologies have increased student access to vital course content. For students of differing socioeconomic backgrounds who may not own a personal computer or have a reliable internet connection and rely primarily on their smart phones or other portable devices to complete school assignments at home, a mobile-friendly learning management system allows them to access the course website, syllabus, course materials, discussions, and more by downloading the app on their phones. While the small screen size of a cell phone may not be ideal for reading a lengthy scholarly article, it provides a convenient avenue for students to read, study, and participate in discussion fora via a mobile app environment in instances when a lack of resources would otherwise preclude engagement. The availability of e-books likewise lowers student book costs and promotes student learning by giving students easier access to the assigned readings without additional cost. I often assign chapters from e-books available in our library collections and embed these chapters within the fully interactive course site. Although the constant use of the smart phone might pose a distraction or arouse fears of compromised attention in the classroom, I attempt
in my courses, whenever possible, to have students use their phones to view readings on our course site and explore the library’s digital archives. Familiarizing students with the research process—finding primary sources, and specifically historic African American newspapers from the mid-to late 1950s—is the main component of an assignment in a first-year writing class in which I ask students to find an article on the integration debate that references the Brown v. Board of Education decision. This assignment often leads to fruitful discussions about academic research methods, digital archives, online databases, and the nature of “search” itself in the age of Google. A mobile app-based course site also facilitates alternative forms of student participation. Recently, I had students submit “virtual oral presentations” as part of a final project. Students were able to record a voice memo or video on their phones and upload it to our course site. The ubiquitous mobile phone, no longer a foe to teachers, has become an effective pedagogical tool for enhancing student engagement in the socioeconomically diverse classroom.

**Teaching Class without Laptops**

—George H. Blaustein, History, University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands

In recent years I have banned laptops and screens from my seminar room. I justify it as the mark of an idealistic, albeit old-fashioned, commitment to the ideal of a seminar. Plus I myself am distractible. Some students bristle at having to print out documents they would otherwise have read on a screen, but I hold fast. Inevitably, though, every now and then I see a student squinting at a PDF on a smartphone. It is pathetic.

Teaching is shaped more and more by course platforms; my university switched recently from Blackboard to Canvas. It is prettier to look at, but my suspicion of “edtech” remains. Or, to put it more finely, I have grown suspicious of universities’ automatic and uncritical embrace of it. This year, somewhat experimentally, I had students hand in only hard copies of their papers, rather than electronic copies. I also opted out of the TurnItIn plagiarism checking software, as it seems odd and unnecessary to run all student work through a set of servers in Silicon Valley. (This might sound paranoid or nostalgic; I still use the platforms for many other things.) The other lamentable aspect of “edtech” is the sense among teachers and students that the machine is always on. Students have enormous digital resources at the ready but in my experience have not really mastered them. “Digital natives” all, they usually start with Google or Google Scholar, yielding via algorithm some undifferentiated array of scholarship. They have not learned to parse the information they now seem to have endless access to. At the same time, they will often be frustrated when they cannot access a text digitally, and are generally oblivious to the economic realities of libraries, electronic
resources, etc. I often find myself pushing upper-bachelor and master students toward library resources and reference works (Oxford Bibliographies, for example), which most of them have never seen. They have used JSTOR but do not really know what its boundaries are, what it contains and what it does not, and why; few have used a bibliographical database before.

In one of my seminars, I send students on weird research errands: fact-finding or document-finding questions that are not easy to google, questions that force them to use some other library resources. (Example: “What is the earliest American bank robbery by a woman that you can find? How did she do it? How much was stolen and what would that be worth today?” This itself is not a thesis question, but one could probably imagine theses for which such a question might be interesting.) They then report back on what they found and how they found it.

Digitalization and the Old World of Print

—M. Lynn Weiss, English and American Studies, William and Mary College

As a discipline, American Studies may have the most to celebrate in the digital age. With an in-class computer or a more sophisticated media lab, our courses can embody interdisciplinarity more easily than ever before. In a recent course on the Harlem Renaissance, instead of describing the popular ideology of ‘the primitive’ that pervaded intellectual circles in Paris and New York, the students watched Josephine Baker’s “Banana Dance,” a 1927 performance at the Folies Bergère on YouTube. The one-minute clip had a stunning impact on even young veteran screen-watchers. Access to the images and sounds of the Jazz age enlivens the canonical texts and makes the learning experience more engaging. The digital age has wholly revolutionized research. Archives that have been digitized can be made available to scholars through their institutions or by permission with a laptop anywhere on earth. The speed and widespread access to archives are head-spinning. At the same time, some platforms limit what one can see of a magazine or a journal. It is possible to see every article in every edition of Ebony online and often in color. But not every platform includes the pages of advertisements and/or the letters to the editor. Such information might be essential to a scholar’s work. And there are obvious limits to what, in an archive, is digitized. Who and/or what decides what becomes part of a digital archive potentially determines what is omitted and included in future scholarship. And the digital image is not an original document. Younger scholars should have the experience of holding a handwritten letter from Nella Larsen to Gertrude Stein, or a letter from Frederick Douglass to Ida B. Wells. Such documents have a “unique existence” (Benjamin 220). Of more concern is the impact of the digital revolution on today’s students’ ability to engage the “old
world” of print and the impact of new media on the human attention span and imagination.

From Strange Historical Archives to E-Reserves

—Catherine Keyser, English, University of South Carolina

My research has benefitted from new technologies and digital resources in part because full-text searches allow me to look for idiosyncratic associations inside scholarly books that would be difficult to trace through indexes or chapter titles. This has turned me on to some scholars and approaches that I would not have found otherwise, but the granular Google Books search is also problematic—both because it makes me dependent on the Google corporation (which is creepy) and because it reinforces the idea that a limited number of scholarly imprints are the resources in my field, which makes citation distressingly centripetal. The most exciting part of Google Books searches for me, however, has been less fellow scholars’ work and more the strange historical archives that they contain: periodical runs of soda bottling guides; historical botanical encyclopedias; popular eugenics tracts from the 1920s. This makes it very easy to write the kind of wide-ranging, associative American Studies work that I do because it has brought to my attention the existence of some of these sources, and I can consult them from my browser rather than the Library of Congress. Again, however, this allows for impersonality to reign; when I do work in our Rare Books and Special Collections here at the University of South Carolina, our finding aid and our fabulous archivists can give me a much stronger sense of the context, circulation, audience, and popularity of a particular source. Google Books makes it available but decontextualizes it, and also makes me more apt to simply cite it than to chat with people about it.

For research that fuels teaching, digital resources, which my students are much cannier at using than I am, have added humor and topical range to my graduate seminar, “Vehicles of Modernity: Transportation Technology and Modern U.S. Literature.” My graduate students write a private course blog, and the links that they find—popular journalism, scholarly works, archival photographs, YouTube videos—are marvelous and allow us to range widely and contextualize wildly. I love that digital writing involves the curation of links and playfully digressive association; I find that process more creative and rewarding than I would have expected. In this case, digital resources prove very sociable. For a musicals class, their ability to stream the musicals obviates the need for a screening, which does take away some of the collective experience, but I am also excited that I can easily provide them with a range of YouTube snippets to demonstrate that performance is also an adaptation of a source text and makes stark choices with the same script or songs.
I have turned my undergraduate “Introduction to American Literature” class over to e-reserves, and while the convenience is as impressive as you would expect (as we go over the readings on the smart board together in real time), I also suspect that they are reading much more quickly and superficially. I even find it hard not to let my own eyes dart down the screen while scrolling. I had one student last semester ask me to suggest an anthology or editions of the works, which I happily did. Also, student temptation to visit summary sites like Spark Notes goes up when they are on the internet anyway. It has not—thankfully—taken away from our classroom atmosphere or camaraderie, which was my biggest fear in the beginning. In the past, I used to have a no-technology policy in the classroom because I think the temptation to text and surf the internet is so high. But because my classes are a moderate size—thirty-five students—and discussion-based, the use of e-reserves has not yet (knock wood) had a deleterious effect on their engagement. Quite to the contrary, when they work on collaborative creative projects, they write scripts together enthusiastically using Google Docs, and I notice that the age-old problem of one person in a small group doing all the work has gone down because this software makes it so easy to work together.

Place and Performance

—Pete L’Official, Literature and American Studies, Bard College

As a scholar and researcher in American literature, I am principally interested in answering myriad versions of what is a single, core question: how does place, setting, or “site” interact with, and influence, literature and related forms of cultural production? This question lies at the center of a nexus of fields that inform my scholarly practice: American and African American Studies, urban history, visual studies, and the history and theory of the American-built environment. More often than not, my attempts at answering that question have involved incorporating new technologies—from the use of digital archives, to new mapping technologies, to new audio production software—in both my teaching and my research. Such incorporations have run from the simple to the somewhat elaborate, and the success of such experiments has been, by turns, both extremely productive and also occasionally frustrating.

For example, the texts in my “Building Stories” course are structured around building typologies and common sites and tropes of urban planning—the brownstone / row house, the apartment building and the office building, the skyscraper, the suburban house—and the various methods of linkage between them. Students in this course are invited both at the beginning of the course and again at its end to visually (or otherwise) render any such “site” as imagined by the accompanying unit’s text. My students have employed tools as varied as digital architectural modeling
software, digital recorders (to create a “soundscape” for an interior or exterior), and manipulated digital photographs in their renderings of these primarily literary settings. I have taught the course twice, and each time my students have surprised me with the intricacy, detail, and imagination demonstrated in their renderings of these literary spaces and sites.

Technology has also helped me realize a long-held dream of mine: replicating the “performance” of five versions of Louis Armstrong’s “(What Did I Do to Feel So) Black and Blue”—playing simultaneously on five different record players—as imagined by the nameless narrator of the famous Prologue to Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man. For a lecture delivered to Bard’s mandatory, year-long, first-year seminar in general education, I was able to enlist the electronic musical expertise of one of my students in executing a live version of this musical scene from the novel—a feat which my student was able to achieve using the visual programming language for music and multimedia known as Max (or, alternatively, as Jitter). Taking Ellison—a noted audiophile—at his “thinker tinker” word, my student built a useful “patch” through which we were able to manipulate and modulate Armstrong’s recording, and thereby more easily hear and experience what Ellison’s narrator hints at in the Prologue. What this digital quintupling of Armstrong’s song allowed us to do was to stretch and pull at Armstrong’s notes—notes themselves already lyrically “bent,” as Ellison’s narrator describes—allowing us to “step inside” and outside of the song’s time, hearing melodic lines echoed, bringing previously unheard vocal resonances to the fore. Max made audible, to myself, my student, and to the first-year audience of my lecture, what Ellison’s narrator describes as “nodes, those points where time stands still or from which it leaps ahead.” The experiment proved useful, not just for the lecture, but for my understanding of Ellison’s novel as a whole, which—with this understanding of the “node”—we might then be able to look at as hardly a novel at all, but rather as a collection of solos—a collection of voices, of speeches, of rants, of monologues, of preaching, of orating, of calls-and-response, and of solitary murmurings, which may not always be in conversation with each other, but which perhaps commune more directly with the reader.

I teach upper-level, single-author seminars on both Ellison and James Baldwin as “Methods in American Literature” courses with strong emphases on archival research, much of which I have myself compiled (on research trips to the Library of Congress for Ellison, and the Schomburg Library, which just acquired Baldwin’s paper archive and is in the process of digitizing some of its contents), catalogued, digitized, and made available (via PDF) to my students for use in their own research queries via Bard’s online Chalkboard system. My aim here is twofold: to illustrate the diversity of approaches to rigorous inquiry within the field, as well as to demonstrate—through a series of related assignments—what makes for a sound research, writing, and revision practice in view of the College’s senior thesis, mandatory for
all students. However, of my incorporations of digital technologies into my teaching, this has seen the least and most varied success, despite it seeming—to my own estimation—to be the easiest method for my students to use digital sources and archives. Very few, if any, of the students actually incorporated—or even cited—these sources in their final research papers. Indeed, a check of the online views of these files (compiled and viewable with a site administrator’s login) confirmed that very few students even consulted them, and that those who did spent very little time doing so. Apparently, doing the “hard work” of sifting through primary archival sources (letters, manuscripts, etc.) and then making those scanned and digitized sources available for download to my students’ laptops for use on their final essays was, in some cases, merely the 2018 version of leading horses to water.

My own research has benefited greatly from the development and maintenance of digital photographic archives, particularly those produced by the New York City Department of Finance, now available through the NYC Municipal Archives website. From 1983 to 1988, data collectors in the Department photographed New York’s streets—from vacant lots in the Bronx to the canyons of tall buildings downtown—resulting in over 800,000 photographs. It was, essentially, a form of Google Street View from the time before Google existed as a search engine. Known as the “Real Property Tax Card Record System for Computer Assisted Mass Appraisal”—or “tax photos” for short—these photographs were captured and filed as systematically as any archival project might be, and they also form the centerpiece of a chapter of my forthcoming book about the symbolic resonance of South Bronx ruin during the 1970s and 1980s, titled *Urban Legends: The South Bronx in Representation and Ruin.*

### Helpful Platforms

—Martha Nadell, English, Brooklyn College

I take “new technologies” to mean new platforms, which I have been using only for a year or so. So first, a little background: I have used two so far and plan to use a third for an ambitious project I will begin next year. In the spring of 2018, I taught “Brooklyn in Literature” and used Hypothesis, which is a free, open-source platform. After students installed the extension, they were able to annotate PDFs from novels and scholarly material, which they gathered from various databases. Working in groups, students wrote marginalia on excerpts from the novels; their annotations became public. They also posted more formal analytical essays, long accounts of historical and social contexts, their own creative work, and, what I think interests you, visual commentary in the form of historical photographs, maps, architectural drawings, and paintings.
In the summer of 2018, I used Hypothesis once again for my nineteenth-century literature class, which revolves around the figure of the dead girl in a number of well-known American novels. Since all of these novels are in the public domain, I worked with a librarian and digital humanities specialist to design an Open Educational Resources OER site that allowed students to read and annotate online. In this class, I provided some visual material for discussion, and students uploaded images that they found for the “student gallery.”

In the spring of 2020, I will teach my “Brooklyn in Literature” class in conjunction with an architectural historian, who will focus her class, “Architecture and Urban Design in New York City,” on Brooklyn. The classes will have the same schedule and meet together, in a large group, at various points in the semester. Students will be organized into cross-class groups and will work on a term-long project using Story Maps, a free ArcGIS platform. Although we are still working out the details, we have tentative plans for each group to focus on a single street or neighborhood that has rich imaginative, architectural, and social histories. Students will tell multiple stories of the location they choose, using textual material—literary and non-literary alike—and visual material—photography, painting, maps, and architectural drawings. We imagine this as a multi-year, multi-course project, and plan to invite courses from other disciplines—Urban Sustainability, Sociology, History, Music—to add to the Story Map of the borough.

The new platforms, especially those related to annotation and storytelling, strike me as offering significant benefits for teaching American Studies courses and for research in general. Consider the use of annotation. Sam Anderson, in his New York Times meditation, “What I Really Want Is Someone Rolling Around in the Text,” reminds us that marginalia possess the “social thrill of shared immersion.” Hypothesis allows students to share their own reading processes and to follow those of others, both their classmates and other readers, rather than to direct their work only to their instructors. Annotation, with this platform, is a public and collaborative act. Moreover, their annotations need not only be textual. The platform allows for visual material to easily become part of the conversation about texts and to be subject to annotation themselves. The downside is that students may treat the visual only as illustration of themes or historical context; without direction from their instructor, they may not engage in a deep, interdisciplinary reading of examples from the two media. In my “Dead Girls” class, I asked students to contribute visual material that somehow related to the novels we were reading. Students posted book covers, scenes from television adaptations, and memes without much analysis, rather than using the visual material to speculate about, say, the relationship between literary realism and nineteenth-century portraiture in depictions of domesticity.

Story Maps may offer other opportunities for teaching and research. The platform itself encourages users to layer, literally, maps and other
visual or multi-media sources and to interweave them with textual accounts. This has the effect of constructing multiple narratives about places, objects, people, or ideas. For students as well as researchers, many of the more interesting Story Maps favor the exploration of material and virtual archives, manifestations of what Aleida Assmann, in “Canon and Archive,” calls the historical archive: “a receptacle for documents that have fallen out of their framing institutions and can be reframed and interpreted in a new context.” In their projects, the English and Art History students will follow Assmann’s sense that the literary and, by extension, the artistic can fill in or mark gaps in the historical archive. We hope that their Story Maps will engage in a sort of radical and accessible interdisciplinarity as they turn outwards, to the general public, to describe the cultural landscapes of Brooklyn, to tell some of the many stories of the borough through the social, architectural, and imaginative histories of the locales they choose.

So, in general, there are some very promising possibilities for teaching and the presentation of research with these platforms: social annotation, multiple narratives, the exploration of the historical archive, and thoughtful interdisciplinarity. Of course, both platforms are only as useful as the directions provided by instructors and the training that students must receive, for although they are digital natives, they may not be familiar with or skilled in using these platforms.

Twitter and Crowd-Sourcing

—Matthew Briones, History, University of Chicago

The use of Twitter and crowd-sourcing to produce syllabi in the wake of certain current events has been quite a revelation. In the aftermath of the 2015 Charleston massacre, three historians (Chad Williams, Kidada E. Williams, and Keisha N. Blain) used the hashtag #CharlestonSyllabus on Twitter to build a recommended reading list on the history of U.S. race relations, South Carolina race relations, global white supremacy, and more. The list would eventually be collected in hard-copy format, but the spread of the hashtag and the initial set of online readings went viral, producing 10,000 retweets in its first hour. With the help of other scholars and librarians, the syllabus is now catalogued, culled, and centralized at the AAIHS website. More can probably be said about the #Twitterstorians, but I will leave it to this article on “Mapping the History Twittersphere.”

Poetry and Poets’ Voices

—Hannah Sullivan, English, Oxford University

For me, Google Books was (and remains) the transformative technology of the last decade. This is true first of all in being able to check quota-
tions and investigate hunches about intertextuality; the kind of glossing, for example, that Christopher Ricks does with famous thoroughness and from memory is now much more within everyone’s reach. But, maybe more interestingly, it also makes the bibliographic coding of nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century first editions universally available in online facsimile. My work on Henry James’s post-publication revision made heavy use of the page images of his original volumes. This is particularly true, I believe, for scholars working in the United States, because a number of books that are available as free e-books for full download there are protected (or thought to be) by copyright in Europe, and so can only be seen in part. (When I was working on some of W. B. Yeats’s first collections, I was able to download the facsimile editions as PDFs, but only by using a U.S. IP address as a workaround; this inconsistent access is obviously a problem.)

The other technology that I use at present in my own research, and also in my teaching of poetry, is a linguistics software called Praat, into which I feed audio files of poems read aloud by different readers, including the original poet. I use an eclectic mixture of things to get sound files, but the Penn Sound Archive and Poetry Archive are good places to start. I find the program useful for analyzing forms of phonological repetition in ‘apparently’ free verse, and also for questioning some of the self-descriptions that twentieth-century poets have given of their own verse-writing. For example, it is not possible to find any form of prosodic equivalence between the three parts making up William Carlos Williams’s triadic lines in Paterson; the arrangement really does seem to be decorative rather than reflective of some underlying sound pattern. The program is, however, quite cumbersome to use, especially if one wants to annotate the sound files, and I would not recommend it to someone without a fairly specialized interest—I think the start-up cost is too high for a graduate term paper or a small part of a chapter. But I have had some students, both at Stanford and Oxford, write interesting papers about the recordings themselves (e.g., comparing Ginsberg’s textually fluid performances of “Howl” by location and date).

**African American Studies**

—James Smethurst, African American Studies, University of Massachusetts Amherst

I suppose that when one talks about new technologies, there is a conflation of what are genuinely new technologies or applications of existing technologies and those that are new to you but may have existed for a while. What has been of particular use to me lately are the databases, or, if you prefer, archives, created and maintained by non-academic groups and institutions, often for commercial or semi-commercial purposes. The technologies that these groups and institutions use have often been around
for some time, but the access to information / documents / artifacts / images they give is comparatively new (to me, anyway). For example, part of a project on which I have been working lately involves the record album liner notes that Amiri Baraka authored in the 1950s and 1960s. He wrote a lot of these notes during this period, of which only a relative handful were ever collected and published in books or journals. Thanks to various websites run by groups and people who are basically record collectors, or who sell to record collectors, I found images of the covers, front and back, of all the records for which Baraka wrote notes. In turn, I was able to magnify these images and read the notes. Before such images were available online, it would have taken me much effort, time, and money (or luck in finding a collector who had already spent the time and money and was willing to give me access to her or his collection) to gather what I needed. As it was, it required only a couple of days or so, no travel, and no money. For the same project, I have used Google Maps, Zillow, and other commercial or semi-commercial applications to look at pictures of addresses and blocks in Newark, NJ, to get a better sense of the landscape and how it has changed, even in a city that I thought I knew pretty well. It was a lot quicker and easier than traveling to Newark and driving around the city in my car. No doubt it was less suspicious to local residents, and perhaps the police, than a guy with out-of-state plates parking on side streets, typing on a laptop, and taking pictures would have been.

As far as downsides go, I worry that uneven resources, which allow some institutions to quickly process archival materials while others take a very long time to process collections due to lack of money, staff, up-to-date technology, etc., applies to digitization, too. There is always the danger that researchers, especially graduate students with limited access to funding for archival work, will depend too much on what is available digitally, and, consequently, not spend time in the physical archives themselves. The availability of digitized materials, then, drives research in ways that distort certain subjects or lead to the avoidance of some subjects altogether. Of course, there have always been such dangers. For example, social scientists, especially younger scholars with time to degree completion and tenure clocks and less access to funding, have long shaped their projects around existing data sets rather than developing their own, with sometimes problematic results. Still, I worry that digitalization exacerbates these problems even as we all have to acknowledge how much we have gained from things like, for instance, the digitalization of the W. E. B. Du Bois Papers at my own campus.

**Missing out on the Chase?**

—Daniel G. Williams, English, Swansea University, Wales

My work on African American visits and responses to Wales began prior to the widespread availability of digitized texts. I had to read the
slave narratives, looking for mentions of Wales and occasionally striking gold every few months, as was the case with Moses Roper and Samuel Ringgold Ward. When these texts became available on the Documenting the American South website, what had taken me several years was suddenly achievable within an afternoon. The potential number of texts is lower in a minority language such as Welsh, but here again there are far too many texts to be read in a lifetime. The National Library of Wales’s Welsh Journals Online is a magnificent resource. Finding out where Frederick Douglass was mentioned in the Victorian periodical press is a word search away. As electronic translation continues to improve, new archives will be open to increasing numbers of scholars, opening new avenues, one hopes, for multilingual and collaborative work. The speed at which the viability of a project can be checked is a major consequence of digitized archives, saving researchers from wild-goose chases. But the chase through old paper archives was not always in vain, and in looking for one non-existent nugget another was often found. Is the more precise nature of electronic research making the accidental discovery of themes and connections less likely?

While researchers have taken advantage of electronic archives for over a decade, evidence of their use in teaching (beyond ‘how to use archives’-type courses and allowing for rapid discovery and accessibility) is harder to locate. I am currently involved in a joint project between Swansea University and the Harry Ransom Institute at Austin, TX, to digitize our holdings of Dylan Thomas’s papers. Building on this project, and making use of it, we hope to establish a transatlantic ‘global classroom’ on the locations of poets and poetry, taught simultaneously by myself in Swansea and by Professor Kurt Heinzelman at UT Austin.

Latino Studies and Media History
—Laura Isabel Serna, Cinema and Media Studies, University of Southern California

My historically-oriented research and teaching sits at the juncture of American Studies, Film Studies, and Latino Studies. In the last ten years the amount of, for example, visual material available digitally has exploded. This has been, in the main, a productive development. For example, I have been exploring a set of sponsored films made by African American documentarian Bill Greaves in support of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission’s efforts to fight discrimination against “Spanish speaking” communities in the early 1970s. These films circulated on the non-theatrical circuit—they were shown in union halls, at libraries, and other similar venues—and, though one was critically acclaimed at the time of its release, they have basically been forgotten. I was able to use online resources that included digitized congressional records, TV Guide, and publications related to the non-theatrical film
trade to piece together their production, exhibition, and reception histories. At the same time, and this is something I remind my students of with what must seem like a monotonous regularity, not everything is online. Recently, my colleague Dino Everett, who is the archivist at the Hugh M. Hefner Moving Image Archive at the University of Southern California, came across a set of films that had been produced in the early 1970s by participants in a film production course for Chicano filmmakers that had been funded by Rene Cardenas of Bilingual Children’s Television (BCTV). While this program and others like it have been noted in histories of Chicano and Latino media, these films have not been seen since they were circulated informally at the time they were made. Now, using new technology, we will be able to make them available to researchers and to students.

In terms of teaching, online resources such as digitized periodicals with robust search engines and digitally available media have expanded the possibilities for student research. In my large survey course on international film history, I encourage students to make use of the Media History Digital Library and its phenomenal search engine, Lantern, to find out how films were marketed and received in their historical moment. This tool gives them access to material that would be difficult for them to find using traditional, printed library resources. At the same time, the research my students conduct indicates their strong belief that everything is on the internet. If they cannot find it via a quick search or it is simply not available, it does not exist. I have spent a great deal of time contemplating how to balance the affordances of the digital with the richness of the analogue. This requires some commitment. It is far easier to direct students (or oneself) to a search engine than to the stacks. But, as the case of the BCTV film illustrates, an uncritical embrace of technology threatens to keep already marginalized histories out of sight.

**Visual Studies**

—Julia Faisst, American Studies, Catholic University Eichstätt, Germany

The recent convergence of digital archives of new documentary photography, videography, and film depicting contemporary forms of social realities such as the global refugee crisis with social justice research and initiatives suggests exciting new trajectories for American Studies and Cultural Studies. Considering the place of new technologies such as digital visual media in an increasingly globalized and multi-polar world, these disciplines think through the social and cultural crises that embolden new documentary aesthetics as well as political activism and social movements alike, in academic and more public formats, and thereby create novel forms of consciousness both within and beyond academic discourses.
Race and Pornography

—Jennifer Nash, African American Studies and Gender and Sexuality Studies, Northwestern University

When I began writing my first book, *The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography*, I made an early decision about the scope of my argument. Though I was regularly asked about the performers whose bodies populated the pornographic screens that I theorized—who they were, the conditions of their labor, and how much they were paid—I always emphasized that my interest was in the kinds of racialized representations their bodies made possible and pleasurable, not in the intricacies of their biographies. In the years after the book made its way into the world, I became interested in pornography’s first black female star—Desiree West—and the relative scholarly inattention to her œuvre. I began research for an article that would both chart West’s career and argue that West taught pornographic spectators how to desire black women.

How would I go about constructing an archive of one of pornography’s largely forgotten stars? After failed attempts to track down West’s early films and fruitless visits to various archives, I decided to turn to another archive: the internet. This is an archive constructed by fans, connoisseurs, and self-declared “experts.” This archive is, of course, shaped both by sexual desires and by desires for comprehensiveness. Pornography’s “connoisseurs” love to display their mastery of the genre, and message boards are populated by an endless trade in rare pictures, video stills, and clips. The more obscure the image is, the more it is valued. Fans also often trade in speculation about actors, particularly actors who are no longer part of the “adult entertainment industry.” Some websites, for example, describe West as a “Black Panther porn star,” and others speculate about her imagined racial background, describing her as “a combination of black and Asian” or possessing “vaguely Asian undertones.” One website reposted a *Hustler* review of West’s film *China Lust* that described her as “the first Black Oriental in porn” and as “a tasty morsel of soul food garnished with just the right amount of Peking Sauce.” If her racial ambiguity is the source of endless debate, her departure from pornography is as well, with some suggesting that “she got into a violent row with Juliet Anderson on set and as a result Spinelli [director Anthony Spinelli] used his connections to ensure she never appeared again in a feature movie.”

Despite the proliferation of scholarly books on pornography (and the relatively recent publication of a scholarly journal devoted to pornography), it remains the case that those of us who want to understand pornography’s social meanings have to labor alongside fans, have to work in—even as we might also resist—their archive, one that is shaped by their intense and explicit desires. It also means that we have to recognize that even as the internet has made more pornographic images
more accessible than ever, speculation, conjecture, and rumor remain
the primary currency of this archive. The task of the scholar, then, is no
longer to find the image, but to decode the social meanings of both the
image and the afterlife of the image. Our task is to interrogate how, for
example, different images of West—as Black Panther, as part-Asian,
as the “tasty” and consumable combination of soul food and Peking
sauce—were strategically mobilized both by the industry and by West
herself to generate pornographic pleasures and profits.

**Jewish American Literature**

—Rachel Rubinstein, American Literature and Jewish Studies,
Hampshire College

Having just completed co-editing (with Roberta Rosenberg) an essay
collection for the MLA on teaching Jewish American Literature, I can
assert with confidence that the groundbreaking multilingual and trans-
national scholarship of a growing cadre of innovative scholars in Amer-
ican Jewish literary studies is transforming the university classroom.
Crucial to these efforts is the rise of digital technology, which makes
materials more available and scholarship more accessible. The digitiza-
tion, for example, of the holdings of the Yiddish Book Center, making
its entire library downloadable for free by the public, coupled with online
scholarly platforms such as In Geveb, the Digital Yiddish Theater Project,
and the monumental Yiddish Dictionary Online, has moved Yiddish cul-
ture into the mainstream of American Studies and has proved invaluable for my own work. Meanwhile, multilingual materials are ever more
accessible to the monolingual student / researcher with the ubiquity of
Google Translate and other experiments in crowd-sourced translation.
Museums, libraries, and faculty members are partnering to create digital
archives that showcase both collections and faculty research. At Reed
College, for example, Laura Leibman’s Jewish Atlantic World Database is
both a useful research tool and exemplary of the expansion of American
Jewish Studies to include Canada, Latin America, and the Caribbean as
important sites of cultural and racial exchange.

The contributors to our anthology incorporate digital technologies
into their pedagogies in diverse and creative ways: from utilizing digi-
tized sheet music collections and a vast archive of YouTube videos in the
teaching of Jewish musical theater to gamifying approaches in which
students of contemporary Jewish cultural production build their own
multimedia digital platforms based on their investigations of museum
websites, online journals like Tablet, blogs, and podcasts, in addition
to literature and film. American students of Jewish culture have par-
ticularly benefited from the rise of a popular digital culture unmediated
by Hollywood—Jewish communities that were heretofore invisible to
most of them (ultra-orthodox and Hasidic Jews, for instance) now have a
widely accessible online presence, and challenge the normative narrative of Jewish assimilation and secularization in the United States.

Digital technologies have, in sum, facilitated the turn in American Jewish Studies toward transnational, multiracial, and multilingual approaches and a renewed understanding of Jewish immigration to America as a history that exceeds the time period circumscribed as 1880–1930 as well as the geographical boundaries of the present-day United States.

Immigration and Deportation

—Yael Schacher, Senior U.S. Domestic Advocate at Refugees International

I have asked students to analyze specific materials from excellent (and open-access) digital archives for my introductory course on U.S. immigration history. The assignments need to be specific or students will get lost in the archives: I have asked students to look up a particular case in the South Asian Digital History Archive or a particular newspaper in the Densho Archive, for example. For a unit on health and immigration, I asked students to take a look at the 1918 “Manual of the Mental Examination of Aliens” issued by the U.S. Public Health Service. I usually pair this with a screening of the documentary Forgotten Ellis Island (Lorie Conway, 2008), which is about the hospital there. From this period, I have also had success using a curated digital collection on the Bisbee deportation, which I plan to pair with Bisbee 17 (Robert Greene, 2018), a new film on the topic. In more advanced courses, I have asked students to compare the experience of going to a museum exhibition and browsing a digital one. A few years ago I took my seminar to an exhibition re-interpreting the journalism and photographs of Jacob Riis at the Museum of the City of New York and also had the students peruse a digitized version of the exhibition on the Library of Congress website. I have given advanced students more open-ended and thematic assignments using the ProQuest history vault collections of digitized records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, 1880–1930 (a collection that many universities subscribe to). I make a point of cautioning students that this is far from a comprehensive collection of the case files that exist at the National Archives. Drawing upon my own research techniques for my advanced seminars, I have taught students to use legal resources such as LexisNexis and HeinOnline to find cases and administrative decisions related to refugees and asylum. Again, a cautionary note is required: these are only the officially published decisions—more in-depth documentary material for the federal court cases and numerous administrative decisions that officials did not publish remain in the archives. Finding these requires seeking out records from the regional branches of the National Archives and from advocacy organizations, few of which have microfilmed or digitized their collections. Digital and electronic resources provide an entrée to a much larger and deeper world of immigration archives.
As someone whose field is popular music and sound, the explosion of digital and streaming listening technologies has been completely transformative, particularly from a pedagogical standpoint. For instance, when assigning listening in my classes I can now either create Spotify playlists for my students to use (all of my students use Spotify, in one form or another), or just upload mp3 files to the course website. Gone are the days of students having to go to the library to check out CDs or vinyl on reserve and listening to them on whatever poor-quality headphones the library has kicking around, which was the story of my own college experience. But of course this presents its own problems. In the age of streaming, students lose contact with the notion of music as a tactile, material entity; for instance, almost none of my students know what liner notes are. And then there is also the problem of history: the sense that “everything” is available in an instant inevitably produces a flattening-out of context, and while streaming platforms strive to present themselves as comprehensive archives, they are immensely inadequate on this front. Platforms like Spotify and even iTunes are often blatantly ahistorical in their curation models and algorithms, and I have found that what little basic historical detail is offered by Spotify—the year a recording was made, for instance, or what label it was originally released on—is often just incorrect. Ephemerality is an enormous issue as well; music comes and goes from these platforms all the time, due to quirks of licensing, intellectual property disputes, and things like that, a fact that the platforms often go to great lengths to obscure. For all of these reasons I actually do not rely much on streaming platforms in my research and scholarship, and would not advise others to do so either; I greatly prefer to own the music I study in one form or another, either on mp3 or, preferably, on CD or vinyl, depending on what its original release format was. What would be ideal going forward would be for platforms like Spotify to seriously embrace their potential as archives as well as simply platforms, and hire historians and other experts to handle the curation of their massive libraries. However, given the economic priorities of these services and their own precarious financial positions, I am not optimistic that this will happen soon.

The Computer Age

—Kathryn Roberts, American Studies, University of Groningen, The Netherlands

Living in the Computer Age means that my students and I have access to troves of information about history, culture, and media. With data-
base subscriptions, universities grant access to even more (and sometimes better) information than what is freely available to the public on the internet. I find that the sheer volume of information, as well as the habits of mind and practice that the internet fosters, present distinct (and often subtle) challenges for pedagogy. We have to assume that basic facts and figures are findable. If my students do not know who Studs Terkel is, or are not sure what we mean by Reconstruction, a five-second "google" and a glance at Wikipedia should enlighten them. This changes my role as a lecturer. In an environment of plentiful information, we can (and, I think, should) focus our pedagogy on critical thinking. Where did the information come from? Is it a good source? What are the competing narratives of how a historical event unfolded? This matters both for pedagogy and for citizenship: critical media literacy is more urgent than ever in a world of "fake news" and filter bubbles.

In my own research, the plenitude of information presents related but distinct challenges. I will focus on one recent example, with the hope that it can stand in for a larger phenomenon. Like many cultural organizations, artist residencies publish historical lists of guests or fellows on their websites. These lists of names act as "evidence" of a kind, testifying to the volume and prestige of culture supported by the foundation. But what kind of "evidence" is this for a researcher? I have been tempted to use this publicly available "data" to understand these private, often secretive organizations—and yet there is no way of verifying the accuracy of these lists, or determining whether Herman Smith and Herman A. Smith, Jr., are the same poet. Instead of treating the names as raw information, I find myself using more traditional rhetorical analysis, considering the strategies of association and status signaling employed by writers and arts organizations on their personal web pages—a medium that has become both ubiquitous in daily life and oddly invisible to cultural studies scholars. Even as the Computer Age presents new challenges for teaching and scholarship, I find that the basic tools of American Studies—critical analysis of diverse cultural texts—can refresh our understanding of the digital world.

What Happened to Finding Aids?

—Adena Spingarn, author of *Uncle Tom, from Martyr to Traitor*

One idea comes to mind: the perhaps gradual disappearance of the finding aid as a method for organizing archival information in the digital age. I have run into this twice now with research for my new project on racial censorship of American movies, and I think if this trend continues it will have a significant impact on American Studies scholarship. I have seen the loss of finding aids in two cases. First, the Motion Picture Association of America Archives in Los Angeles have no finding aids.
there is no way to get a sense of what is in a collection without clicking through page after page of results. Second, ProQuest’s digitization of the NAACP Papers is highly selective and does not map onto the extensive finding aid made by the Library of Congress. In both cases, a scholar cannot get a sense of the full extent of the archive, so the chance of new discoveries is limited.

Nothing New under the Sun

—Brian Hochman, English, American Studies, Film and Media Studies, Georgetown University

If Americanists can learn one thing from the history of technology, it is that there is nothing inherent or permanent about technological innovations. Their lives in the present are the products of negotiation and debate. Their futures will look different than we think.

Edward Bellamy’s 1889 short story “With the Eyes Shut” is one of the historical examples that I like to use to illustrate these truths. The plot of Bellamy’s story resembles that of his famous novel Looking Backward, with a curious technological twist. A nameless protagonist, the narrator of the story, falls asleep on a train and wakes up in a distant future. When he opens his eyes, he discovers that his world has been overrun by the new technology of the phonograph, invented only a decade prior. Phonographs have replaced books, clocks, newspapers, and the mail. Train conductors are phonographs, priests are phonographs, and schoolteachers are phonographs. The characters in the story no longer need to remember anything about the minutiae of their everyday lives: appointments, engagements, birth dates. Phonographs have superseded the workings of human memory itself.

“With the Eyes Shut” satirizes the stock narratives that Americans often rely on to talk about new technological inventions. There is a utopian narrative to the story: the phonograph has made life easier, more enjoyable, and more convenient. There is also a dystopian narrative to the story: the phonograph has upended social relations so completely that the protagonist finds himself lost and afraid, unable to distinguish between dreams and reality. In both cases, technological change moves so swiftly that the world passes the narrator by as soon as he closes his eyes.

Careful readers of Bellamy’s tale will recognize how similar these narratives are to the stories we tell ourselves about our digital present. Today we are told that new digital tools are here to usher in an era of revolutionary change, an age by turns utopian and dystopian. Search engines and data analytics programs facilitate, connect, accelerate, and transform. Social media platforms innovate, disrupt, and destroy. But when read against Bellamy’s phonograph, such grandiose pronouncements start to ring uncannily hollow. The uses and effects of digital
technology largely accord to the patterns that history has laid for us. What the world heralds as “new and improved” today is, in this sense, age-old and only temporary. Remember: the phonograph that seemed to inaugurate such revolutionary change in Bellamy’s time never quite lived up to the hype, and has long since fallen obsolete.

At bottom, my work in the field of American Studies reckons with the similarities between Bellamy’s age and our own, exploring how the technological realities that we take for granted in the present are often the uneven product of historical negotiation. My first book, *Savage Preservation: The Ethnographic Origins of Modern Media Technology*, took up this issue by showing how early-twentieth-century attempts to preserve disappearing cultures laid the groundwork for a number of far-reaching ideas about the power of audiovisual media. Likewise, my current book, *The Uninvited Ear: A History of Wiretapping in the United States*, provides the hidden backstory to contemporary debates about privacy and surveillance, following the political life of wiretapping and electronic eavesdropping technologies in America from the mid-nineteenth century to the near present. Throughout, I try to show that novelty is an idea—and an ideology—that we should regard with suspicion. I believe that keeping this fact in mind will help the field engage more responsibly with the upheavals of our moment, technological or otherwise.

These twenty brief comments on the effects of new technologies by scholars working today invite more dialogue and debate among readers, as they contain practical suggestions and links as well as caveats and serious concerns, optimism as well as anxiety. Given that quite a few respondents voice both the positives and the negatives, it was not easy to arrange their comments in such a way that sharp counterpoints would emerge between one and the next comment, but the reader is nonetheless confronted with different perspectives both between and within the responses. Yes, the new search engines and browsing tools give us previously undreamed-of ways of finding research materials ranging from soda bottling guides (Keyser) to pornography’s largely forgotten stars (Nash), from digitized runs of *Ebony* (Weiss) to William Carlos Williams’s voice (Sullivan), from the marketing and reception of films (Serna) to Yiddish sheet music collections (Rubinstein), and from extensive photographic archives of New York City (L’Official) and seemingly limitless sound recordings (Hamilton) to new documentary photography, videography, and film depicting the global refugee crisis (Faisst) and vast records of immigration and deportation (Schacher).

And yet, will new generations of scholars working only with these new tools “depend too much on what is available digitally, and, consequently, not spend time in the physical archives themselves” (Smethurst),
hence missing, for example, the “much larger and deeper world” of non-digitized immigration archives (Schacher)? Will scholars increasingly acquire a decontextualized sense of textual excerpts (“hits”) that makes them “more apt to simply cite” than to discuss (Keyser)? Are we in danger of losing the Benjaminian sense of the “unique existence” of documents (Weiss), the “tactile, material” quality of music (Hamilton), and “the richness of the analogue” (Serna)? “Is the more precise nature of electronic research making the accidental discovery of themes and connections less likely” (Williams)? Will scholars be emboldened in political activism (Faisst) and address the crises that digital archives document so well, or will they find it lamentable that “the machine is always on” (Blaustein)? Will we, in the hands of constantly update-greedy gadgets, still be able to recognize that “novelty is an idea—and an ideology—that we should regard with suspicion” (Hochman)?

The example of liner notes on old record covers appears in different contexts in the responses: one scholar laments that, thanks to digitized music sites on the internet that omit those notes on record and album sleeves, students no longer know what liner notes are (Hamilton), whereas another manages with the help of the internet to reconstruct Amiri Baraka’s ephemeral liner notes from what Hsu calls “the infinite warehouses of eBay or Etsy,” in this case, the websites of record collectors (Smethurst). The internet taketh and the internet giveth.

The divides are just as deep when it comes to teaching. Do smartphones represent “an effective pedagogical tool to enhance student engagement in the socioeconomically diverse classroom” (Kennon), or do they endanger the “ideal of a seminar,” as they may distract students and teachers (Blaustein) and displace the sense of “owning” books and texts in a world increasingly dominated by “social media and online monopolies” and characterized by a “narrowing divide between art and commerce, politics and rage” (Hsu)? Will students of the future be able to parse the flood of contradictory information on a given subject (Blaustein), or will that be delegated to algorithms? Does the new software make it easier for students to work together (Keyser), to construct imaginative story maps of a literary cultural street in Brooklyn (Nadell), to create a programmed multimedia version of a scene in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (L’Official), or to study crowdsourced materials on the 2015 Charleston massacre (Briones), or will students, if they cannot find something with a quick internet search, come to believe that it must not exist (Serna)?

There is some convergence in these responses around the idea that the world of digital research and teaching makes human guidance all the more necessary. This may be in the best Americanist tradition, for “the basic tools of American Studies—critical analysis of diverse cultural texts—can refresh our understanding of the digital world” (Roberts). Or it may take the form of devising finding aids that seem to be gradually disappearing (Spingarn), of monitoring the discouragingly
low web traffic on digital sites set up by teachers for the students’ benefit (L’Official), of pushing students toward non-digital library resources and reference works (Blaustein), or of suggesting that historians should curate commercial websites (Hamilton). “Access” to and “availability” of sources, important though they are, constitute only the first steps toward learning, and platforms are only as useful as the direction, guidance, and curation provided by instructors (Nadell) and educators more generally, for “in an environment of plentiful information, we can (and, I think, should) focus our pedagogy on critical thinking” (Roberts). The digital archive has made it easier in so many cases to find the image, which makes it the task of the scholar (and teacher) to decode the social meanings of the image and its afterlife (Nash). One could therefore conclude this informal survey with the paradox that the more digital our academic environments become the more urgently human guidance and intervention would seem to be needed.

CODA: ... and Tomorrow?

After the above comments on the current situation of teaching and research had very quickly arrived in my inbox, the Research Professor of Engineering at New York University Abu Dhabi Ramesh Jagannathan drew my attention to an article by Lucas Rizzotto on the vast potential of artificial intelligence (or AI) for all levels of education. With the rapid development of “deep learning” by self-learning machines, the argument goes, a new global educational system might emerge that could not only offer education to greater masses of people all around the world, but also create a more individualized “immersive” learning experience for each student, who would interact with ever more sophisticated machinery, while classrooms would no longer be “a physical place, but […] an abstract location where collaborative learning exists that can take on any form.” In the area of technology, such forms of knowledge and skill acquisition are already in place, as the apparently popular courses at sites like Stanford’s Udacity suggest. In biology or anatomy, learning tools such as TheBodyVR work effectively with virtual reality. There are even art exhibitions that exclusively feature work created by artificial intelligence, and at the AEON website one reads under the headline “When Robots Read Books” that “an automaton might one day be able to simulate, for itself, the feelings we have when we read a story.” Karl Schroeder is more skeptical and stresses, at the UNESCO website, that while he concedes that creativity could eventually happen outside of human beings, so far “computers do not produce meaning, and human intervention is always necessary in the creative process, even if technological devices are becoming more refined and approaching human capabilities.”

Could students learn about pity and fear from a computerized experience? Learn how to interpret a short story or read a historical document critically when, as Jagannathan argues, we all know “that the se-
cret sauce of teaching is not just content and delivery but inspiration”? In a few decades, will we, or our descendants, be laughing with robots who will patiently explain to us what is funny about Mark Twain’s *Innocents Abroad*? Will we be debating the pros and cons of artificial intelligence and new technologies, not with a teacher or with fellow students, not with colleagues or in a forum organized by an online journal, but with an embodied talking, listening, and thinking machine that knows more facts about each of us individually than any mere human ever might—a nearly omniscient *Siri 2.0*—and that could furthermore be trained to speak to us in Gertrude Stein’s or Eudora Welty’s voice? Or are such visions of the future themselves figments of a specifically human imagination that found expression in earlier times in Ovid’s *Pygmalion*, E. T. A. Hoffmann’s *Olimpia*, Auguste de Villiers de l’Isle Adam’s *Eve of the Future*—and, of course, in Edward Bellamy’s uncanny vision of phonographs replacing teachers, which turned out to be a “hype” (as Hochman writes) that machines never quite lived up to?

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