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Finding Your Voice in the Machine

An Interview with Lillian-Yvonne Bertram

Julian C. Chambliss, *Michigan State University* 

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You can listen to this interview on the [Scholarly Editing website](#).



Lillian-Yvonne Bertram

Lillian-Yvonne Bertram is an Associate Professor of English and Director of the MFA in Creative Writing at the University of Maryland, whose work brings experimental writing, computation, poetry, and archival imagination into sustained conversation. Bertram has received numerous honors, including being selected by Claudia Rankine as the Benjamin Saltman Award winner in 2010 and recipient of an NEA Creative Writing Poetry Fellowship in 2014. Their recent projects include *Output: An Anthology of Computer-Generated Text, 1953–2023* (2024), co-edited with Nick Montfort, and the AI-generated chapbook *A Black Story May Contain Sensitive Content* (2024). Across books such as *But a Storm Is Blowing from Paradise* (2012), *Personal Science* (2016), *Travesty Generator* (2019), and *Negative Money* (2023), Bertram explores how language systems shape identity,

memory, race, and cultural expression. This interview offers insights into their perspective on creative practice, technology, and culture. Readers of *Scholarly Editing* will notice that their experience intersects with concerns about editorial theory and textual practice across print, digital, and creative forms. Bertram's years of thinking and writing in the context of digital tools offer sharp insights into how writing, archives, and community intersect to create challenges and opportunities. Bertram's work highlights a long and complex history of computational writing, often overlooked in the era of large language models. Inherent in their work and demonstrated by their experience is a recognition that new tools require greater effort from the individual user to engage with text,

understand their origins, and assess their meanings. While the technology may enable different ways of practice, it also forces us to ask questions about how we understand and what we can create.

Julian Chambliss: So my first question for you is, you describe your practice as part of a longer arc of computational poetics. Can you trace that arc a little bit and explain how projects like *Travesty Generator* sit alongside your current views of AI?

Lillian-Yvonne Bertram: Yeah, so in order to sort of trace *Travesty Generator* to work with AI, I have to go backward, um, in the work that I've done and been doing for, um, I guess almost 20 years now so, or closer to 15. And so my first book, *But a Storm Is Blowing From Paradise*, is a book that I was very interested in, different kinds of poetic forms, innovative practices, and something that I was interested in doing in that book, there were some poems that were really playing with how language can be rearranged and distorted. And so there's a series of poems in that book. They're called Fractal poems. And so they do this kind of thing where they, they sort of hinge and then turn back on themselves, but the language is reorganized in, in a different, stranger way. So this kind of, like, destabilization, defamiliarization of language is present there. And I think I was doing that. If I recall correctly, one of my methods of kind of twisting language was through machine translation. And so there are only a couple poems in that book that are like that. And then in my second book, *A Slice from the Cake Made of Air*, I leaned heavily into machine translation as a method to [inaudible] do kinds of permutations with language. So something that I was interested in was, I was thinking at the time, what if you could, what if you multiply language? Like, what happens when you multiply a letter or if you multiply a word? What does that, what could that look like? Or if you divided a word, if you divided letters. And so I got, I got interested in, well, how could you do that? Do a, run a mathematical formula or a permutation on language? And so I also put that out there that, like, these are concepts as I understand them, um, could you run, like, a permutation process on a poem? And how many different ways can those words be arranged? Right?

Kind of like how many different ways can letters be arranged in a word to still have a readable word? Right? And so one of the ways that I started getting at this was I would do machine translation. I would do what was ultimately was like an English to English translation of a poem, but through— it would traverse many different languages before it got back to English. And so you had something that in my mind says, “okay, this is a permutation of the original piece that sounds, like, very different, but it has a lot of echoes to the original.” So a lot of those processes were in *A Slice From The Cake Made of Air*, the central kind of poem that, like, winds throughout the book is a poem that occurs at the beginning that gets fragmented and permuted several times throughout the book. And each sort of permutation is listed with a mathematical notation in the book.

And then at the end the poem is reassembled as a sort of final reconstructed form. And it's similar but different. And in that process, which was, which was exciting for me, now is obviously just sort of using the tools that I had at the time, you know. It was exciting for me because I was always interested in thinking, like, how do we kind of push, I mean what are ways to push the boundaries of syntax legibility [in] language, in my own writing especially, to kind of break out of my traditional normalized ways of writing. And it was very successful in doing that and it was really kind of exciting to see and I was like, okay, this method has produced combinations of words next to each other that are very evocative. And that's what, you know for me as a reader, that's what I'm interested in reading. So, you know, that's also then what I'm interested in writing. And so that was my second book.

So in a, in a way you can say that I was using computational processes, right, because machine translation is a computational methodology, but I wouldn't have called it that at the time because, you know, what did I know? I just didn't have [laughs] just didn't have the language for it. My, my third book, *Personal Science*, does a lot of weird different things. It departs from both books, but one of the things that it does, I guess, continue is this notion of personal science of concepts as I understand them. And one of the sort of founding, strong concepts in that book is homo narrans. How do we narrate the self? My first book, I was also kind of obsessed with, like, space and celestial bodies and there are some, like, mathematical notations that pop up also in *Personal Science*, and then, and that was like, geez, 2017. So around the time I want to say that *Personal Science* was coming out, I had already started working with digital poetics and, you know,— I had, I had interest in, like, photography for a long time, so I had been doing things like video poems or like little video essays, and so I started just delving more into digital poetics and, you know, you know like, video poems, but also stuff involving the web.

And then I was interested in hardware and software and I was very slowly kinda getting exposed to computational poetics. I was like, oh, there are in fact people who are using programs or algorithms or these equations and applying them to language and doing the things that I'm interested in having language do. And so a story that I often tell because people are like, how did you even just get into this in the first place? It's like, how do you, you know? And part of it is, well, I was always interested in doing stuff with language and, um, through a chance encounter, I, like, walked out of my house one day and walked into, like, a street fair, a local street fair, and the local makerspace had a tent and they had, um, they had all this stuff out and they had a banana piano, which literally was just, like, a little piano made out of bananas. And so it was like a small piano, it was like the keys were bananas and you touch the bananas and a sound came out of a speaker. This is the most amazing thing!

I want to learn how to make a banana piano, but I want it, I want it— instead of sound, let's do words, let's do poems, right? Whatever can come out of it can be rearranged in these different ways at random. And so I was very interested in randomization, so I asked the makerspace guys like, Hey, is this something— can you teach me how to do this? They said, yes, come on down. I went on down that day and started working with Raspberry Pi, which is a microcomputer, fast-forward hours and hours of somebody being kind enough to work with me and teach me about, you know, programming languages. And yes, there were tears. My first project was a receipt printer where when you pressed a button, a poem would be printed out of this tiny thermal receipt printer and that poem that had been programmed into the Raspberry Pi was, it was just sets of, it was just like a database of lines from my own poems that were then randomly reorganized and printed.

And so I would get these mashups of my own work, which I thought was pretty cool because I was interested in randomization as an [sic] compositional method. That is what took me into actually then saying, okay, discovering other folks' work like Nick Montfort who's a collaborator and colleague of mine, and realizing that you can, in fact, like, I was thinking earlier of, like, well, can you treat, you know, text or words like numbers and, like, yes you can, and you can shuffle them, you can randomize them and you can do permutations and all of these things using programming languages. And so that's what I started doing and that's what led to me being able to accomplish the work that's in *Travesty Generator*. At the time, I was also like, if I'm going to be using these methods, these computational methods to compose work, it has to be urgent. [laughs] It has to be responding to something, to what's going on in the world.

And at the time, you know, we had Trayvon Martin and George Floyd and so on, so that kind of became the exegesis of, of *Travesty Generator*, which people, people look at *Travesty Generator* and say like, "oh, this is AI", but it is not. It is not AI. It is computation. I built the code, you know, or I modified the code. It's contained, it's pretty, you know, it's deterministic in some ways. It doesn't use, it doesn't consult, like, an outside database, all the textual data is data that I put in. It's hard coded, hand coded work. It's not using a model that's out there somewhere. So in that sense it's all small language models. Around the same time that *Travesty Generator* was coming out, I had discovered neural networks, things like image classification, language models, but at the time, it wasn't at the level that we have it right now. It was like, look, here, here's something you can train a neural network to do; this and generate text.

How cool. Generating text with a neural network was an example, was how to prove the capability of the network for other tasks. It wasn't, you know, it was proving the methodology. It wasn't just for the purpose of generating text, right? It was like the structure is what's important here. The algorithm is what's important. How it learns and how you train it is what's important. So from the get go, there was this idea of, well, what happens if we work with a text as a corpus and work with the text as a material and find different ways to kind of interact with it using computation? And so I started doing this, you know, with the archive of Gwendolyn Brooks's work and I have, you know, there's the web-based poem, uh, "Forever Gwen Brooks," which is sort of like an infinite generator of one of her poems. So when I started working with, uh, machine learning and neural networks and the early transformers,— I returned to her archive.

If you're learning how to do this, a lot of the tutorials and methods were like, okay, let's go to Project Gutenberg and we're going to take Shakespeare and we're going to, like, train a network on Shakespeare. And I was like, okay, I'm cool with Shakespeare. I don't necessarily need more of it in my life. And so I was interested in Gwendolyn Brooks and how computation could return me to her work, uh, in different ways. Fine tuning a model on her work with something that involved going to the library and getting out all of her books and, like, scanning them or typing them in, you know, scanning didn't necessarily work because optical character recognition at the time was not that great, so you had to go and fix it anyway. So it meant going through all the books and information that I could find and then putting it into, into the network and then doing generation from there. And I had some just very interesting experiences [laughs] as a result of doing that, but the pleasure of it was the intimate connection I was able to have with her work by doing it that way as opposed to just kind of grabbing something from Gutenberg, grabbing something from another archive. The story of how I started working with, with AI begins way back in, like, 2010 with how I'm thinking about doing permutations of language.

Julian Chambliss: I really appreciate that because it gives the readers a sense of a longer history that I think a lot of people in DH and digital humanities and associated fields in the humanities seeing the impact of computational techniques and different kind of conversations around electronic writing, they have a different take on AI and part of it has to do with they had these little formative longer narratives of how they've been using computers and what they can do. So I really appreciate that answer. I think it'll really resonate with people. When we initially talked, you had mentioned something that I thought was really important that you talked about failure can be artistically productive in computational work. Really made me think about, um, the idea, like, you know, kind of engineered failures, for lack of a better term, interest you and what kind of practice would you encourage for people to consider in the moment that we're in?

Lillian-Yvonne Bertram: Yeah, I mean, I would, I would encourage how to break a model or to reveal it. I mean that was part of the impetus behind the book *A Black Story May Contain Sensitive Content*. My first interactions with a transformer based model, I was very curious, you know, because you, you got the sense from people who made these models. It was like look, it's got all this information. You can ask it anything. That doesn't mean it knows anything. It doesn't necessarily know anything, but it, you know, you can ask it anything. And so I was interested in probing its knowledge or the limits or lack thereof around questions of police brutality, anti-blackness, oppression. You know, it was some pretty interesting results because you prompt, you prompt the model and it will respond in those days because you weren't working through an interface like ChatGPT, you were just working with the network itself. Sometimes you could say like, okay, give me 10 different responses, you know, 10 different outputs to this prompt.

Some of it would just be like gobbledy gook. So you knew it was trying to grab something from Reddit, whatever. And when I started using the interface that was provided by OpenAI and I just, I started with a simple prompt. You know, I was like, start with, like, tell me a story. And then I started prompting it with tell me a Black story and the responses I got to that were really fascinating and I recorded a lot of them in that book. They were— they all had to do with black person gets killed in the drive-by shooting, then the family has to come together to overcome... a lot of these overcoming challenges and other kinds of things. You know, a Black person was enslaved and then they, they had to head north for freedom— all this kind of stuff. And I was like, well, this is interesting that this is the narrative that this system understands as being a Black story and is able to kind of string together and it's incredibly limited.

Not only are the details of it limited, but the actual way of telling a story was incredibly limited. It was all like "once upon a time." Not all stories start with "once upon a time," right. How it understands storytelling was interesting to see. And then I would prompt the version of the network that I trained on Gwendolyn Brooks and it was, it was just radically different. So it was interesting to see how far the narrative shifted by being exposed to what ultimately amounts to a small amount of text, but when you ask it to pay attention to the patterns and styles of that small amount of text, like, the difference, that— in that sense, it's like when asking it to tell me Black story, what it demonstrated was a failure of, of competence in a lot of ways, a failure of imagination when it came to storytelling, a failure of cultural competence, which is a failure of its data of course, [laughs] which is a failure of us [laughs] so, you know, writ large.

What I was trying to do with that project was to throw things into stark relief. Just because this program is competent at putting texts together does not mean it is successful, you know. We have to really adjust our measures of that because when you start to ask it other things, it exposes itself. And so at the time, if you started to talk to the network about questions of, like, gender, sexuality, trans people, Black people, you know, if you ask questions about race, it would flash this warning up: just FYI, It seems like the output is going to contain some sensitive content. So it would flag anything that had to do with race or sexuality as potentially sensitive content, right. Like, be careful before you share this with anyone because kind of like we don't know what'll come out of it, so you know [laughs] it's on you to be careful with what you do with this output.

We have no control over it, in other words. So that's where the title came from and I was like, that's really interesting that any question of race is sensitive content that gets flagged. Any question about gender and sexuality is sensitive content that gets flagged. And so to me it was a counter demonstration of what it was capable of in terms of ex— exposing the cracks. You may use this, you may ask it something and use it for something, but this is when you probe a little deeper, you ask it something a bit more complicated, it, it still tries to come up with something and what it comes up with can be kind of, like, really alarming and also flattening and stereotypical. And that to me was, like, I saw that as a failure. So I'm, I am interested in where those limits are, and how quickly they can be reached. The interfaces that we use now, like when we go to Chat GPT, when we go to Claude, there's a whole lot that's built on top of that.

We're not going directly to the network. We're going through all — we're going through a lot of filters that the people at those companies have decided we need. So we don't, like our inputs get changed into something else and then they go to the network, you know. So these are all things that we don't see, so it can be a bit harder to kind of push them to their limits, but that's, that's what I guess I encourage doing, especially with my students, it's like, what is it to really be critical about, well, what is this, what is this output really demonstrating? Right? Aside from the fact that it can put words together in a really coherent way and it can, like, write an email for you. Beside the fact that it can make a task easier, what else is it demonstrating?

Julian Chambliss: I think that's a really important question and it really speaks to my next question because, you know, *Scholarly Editing* - the journal that this interview is in - speaks directly to the community in the field of documentary editing, and I'm curious from your perspective, especially, like, given the things that you've done and think about, and teach, what are the sort of responsibilities and conversations that you think a community that is sort of dedicated to documentary editing and the archive and that, that kind of process, what, what should they be doing in this sort of AI inflected moment where all these tools are being rolled out? As you say, like, they have these sort of hidden processes. What are these sort of communities of practice, communities of discipline or disciplinary conversation? What do you want them to talk about? What do you think they should be considering?

Lillian-Yvonne Bertram: Well, I think first of all, is it a tool that needs to be used? Why would we be using [laughs] a particular tool for a particular thing, and — and just seriously investigating the tool. Like, who made it? What is it made for? I think there are a lot of ways in which the tools could be very useful because they do, they can do some things very good and very quickly, right. Like, they can summarize a text, but, you know, would I—should you use it to summarize a text that you haven't read? Probably not, right. Would I use it to summarize an archive that I did not know, that I wasn't familiar with? I mean, it's very tempting to do that because, you know, we're all pressed for time and we're being kind of told that, you know, these are productivity enhancers, right? It's like, you know, more done in less time, um, but they're all — they're so error prone, right. Like, just because it's picking something out doesn't mean that you wouldn't pick out something different, right, or that other readers wouldn't pick out something different. So I think, like, you know, it can simplify workflow but also adds another step to it because you have to, you have to double check it, you know, and you have to see, well, what is it missing, you know? What has it deemed important to pull out and, like, how does it make that decision

Is it, you know, like, what— is it, is it, like, number of occurrences of something in a text or where it occurs in a sentence,— you know, like all of these things, you know, it starts to get really complicated. So I think, like, I think it's important to know the tools and to experiment with them and to use them, but also, you know, be very skeptical about the level of trust, right. And I know that, like, how do we know that we can trust these tools to do the thing that we're asking them to do? If we are saying, gosh, here's this, here's a thousand pages of a newspaper in an archive, summarize it or pull out, you know, X number of things. And we haven't read those thousand pages. But, how can we trust what it is? Like, how do we build trust with that model? And there are people working on these questions, right. Like how do we improve faith in the model? Like, how do we report — how can the model report on its, like, trustworthiness so that we can have faith in it and what it's doing so that, you know, we're not adding that extra step to workflow that's, like, now we have to check the work.

In which case you might as well just have done it by hand to begin with, right. If you're going to have to go back and do it by hand in the end, which is not to say that it can't pull out things that are really interesting that you then want to investigate. A healthy degree of skepticism and again, staying on top of models that have some kind of trustworthiness built in or that the companies are, are working on that or thinking about that. But is it, you know, is it a substitute for, like, going to the archive oneself? No. Can it be useful in preserving archive? Yes, absolutely. You know, when I'm working with students and we do stuff with language models or, or even small language models stuff, they build their own. I'm very cautious about them using giant swaths of text that they have no relationship to, that they haven't read, because it's like, if you don't know what's in there, you don't know what's in there. You know, like, full stop. So I think there's an enormous amount of potential, but alongside that potential, it's hard to stay, like, up to date on the risks and the trustworthiness, but that's also required to interact with these tools in a responsible way.

Julian Chambliss: I think the same thing. There's always a lot of potential, but that point of you don't know what's in there and all the happy accidents that come when you look in an archive and the number of times that you might go to something that you've read one time, but when you know more, you see more, even with something you've, you've read before.

Always interesting, right? Well, you're not going to be able to do that with a computer reading it for you, [laughs] which is, like, this really, really complicated thing.

Lillian-Yvonne Bertram: And it depends too, like in some cases, like, would I maybe have Claude or something read, you know, some documents from my, like, insurance company? I might, you know, or something like that. It really, it really depends on, like, what's at stake I think too. What are the consequences of misreading or mis-summarizing, you know, a particular document? The stakes are lower and higher for different things.

Julian Chambliss: Right. And, and I think that that's an important question, you know, ethically. Every educational institution has rolled out at some level, varying degrees of ethical statements around AI and its use. They vary in their specificity and what they're asking people, but they all sort of, like, acknowledge we are in a moment where there are ethical considerations that they have to have when using AI, citing it, telling people how you used it, sort of incorporating it into some sort of very visible practice. It strikes me, given some of the things you've said, that there is actually, like, levels of ethical considerations that you would advocate for across a set of practices. What you say to students is different than what you would say to a colleague. What you would say to an institution is different than say, what you would say to community members, right, because at some level this is a societal transformation that's happening so that every individual has to make these sort of ethical considerations. So I'm just curious, is there an ethical roadmap that you sort of, like, have coined yourself, this is my sort of ethical toolkit here, that you can share with the readers, with people that might be listening and like, "Okay, I want to be like them, what should I? [laughs] How should I approach this?"

Lillian-Yvonne Bertram: I mean— because part of the thing is it's always— it's constantly evolving, you know? And I'm with a lot of educators who feel like AI happened without us, and it's, it's like the train we're trying to catch and everything that we're doing is, like, we're having these ethical conversations and policies and AI policies after the fact. We're forced to come up with something because we weren't part of the conversation during development about what these considerations might be. And so, you know, so now we're all scrambling with, like, different versions of, like, what feels okay to do and to not do. There's always ethical consideration of each time they do an input output, how much water is consumed? The environmental impact is huge of a Chat GPT. For me, I'm sort of like, well, do I need to do it? Do I need to use this tool for this purpose? Most of the time I do not use AI, which really what we're talking about is large language models.

90% of the work that I do has nothing to do with it, right, so I don't use it. And I don't use it in my creative writing practice unless it's specifically for a project that has to do with that, like *A Black Story* That was a specific project. I used it for that, or I, or I use it for very specific organizational tasks that I may struggle to do on my own. Things like, if I have 10 students and this is their schedule, like, find an availability for all 10 people, you know. Something like that, I might use it for. When I was fine tuning, I didn't just grab information that I wasn't familiar with. I knew intimately the corpus that I was working with. I advocate for that for my students. Like, know the corpus that you're working with. And part of why that was important for me was because the models are uncertain and fallible and all of this stuff, I would crosscheck the output with the corpus. You can do things called, like, overfitting.

You can overfit the model, or you can overtrain the model, and it can reproduce exactly the writing that went into it. I got an output from the fine-tuned model and I was like, “oh my God, this is amazing. This poem segment is amazing. This is fascinating. The language is so rich.” And, you know, but it was taking me for a ride, ‘cause then when I crosschecked it with the corpus, the lines that I thought were so amazing were exactly the lines that Gwendolyn Brooks had written. So I, so I think, like, for me, ethically, like, if you’re working with a corpus to know that corpus to sort of know what it is you’re trying to, why you’re using the model or tool, if it’s a tool that you really need to use in the first place, what it would actually do for you to use it. But these things are all changing all the time as the models themselves change and as the laws around them change.

What’s legal to do might not necessarily feel ethical to do for oneself, you know. As an example, people don’t want their books being used without their permission to train the model. My books have shown up on some of those lists to train the model. I don’t particularly have an issue with that personally. I don’t have control of who takes the book out of the library either, but that’s me. That’s sort of how I approach it, and I also am aware that, like, my work in the model has almost no effect on it. We start talking about the considerations around that because of copyright law, because profit comes into it. And so, like, if we didn’t have those other things around it, like, would we still have the same questions? My ethics around it are constantly evolving depending on the projects that I’m interested in doing. There are certainly projects that I haven’t done for ethical reasons and as the models and things evolve. And so, like, it’s definitely— we can’t just have one single roadmap because there’s so many different models that can be used and so many different projects, and the pace at which everything is evolving is, is like, too rapid to keep up with.

Julian Chambliss: Can you, if you’re comfortable, talk briefly about something you didn’t do because you’re like, “oh, no!” [laughs] this will lead to, I don’t know, X, Y, and Z.” I’m kind of curious. If you don’t want to, that’s fine, but I’m like, “Ooh!”

Lillian-Yvonne Bertram: Um, I, like, I had taken— I was using work from I think Project Gutenberg... Yeah, I’m not going to talk about it. [laughs]

Julian Chambliss: That’s fair. That’s fair.

Lillian-Yvonne Bertram: But I was like, and the outputs were interesting, and then I was like, eh, I’m not ready for the level of theorizing that really needs to go into this particular project. And like, there is something, and, you know, I was like, the text that I was looking at, I was like, there’s also a lot of work that’s kind of been done around these narratives and what makes them similar and different, and it, you can just sort of see that in the model’s version of it, and I was like, is that really...? Like, we don’t need the model’s output to tell us what we already know about how certain texts and narratives are constructed.

Julian Chambliss: Obviously, one of the reasons I wanted to talk with you is because I see your work in the framework of Afrofuturism or Black speculative practice. And whether or not you frame yourself that way, I think there's ways that your work, because its use of computers, some of the sort of critical creative elements that are evident in your approaches, the ethical considerations that are really sort of core. And I wonder, you know, from your perspective— granted, you may not necessarily see this— do you see yourself as an Afrofuturist? And if so, are there things about this particular moment that excite you for their possibility of generating something that's unique and new that is sort of shaped by a richer way of thinking about Blackness? Because at some level, I think that's one of the things that your work has done, right, it has, has asked really important questions about Blackness.

Lillian-Yvonne Bertram: Yes, I do think there's a lot of potential and oppor— and opportunity, um, vis-à-vis Afrofuturism, and, and I've seen some really, really cool things come out of, like, how, how Black folks are using AI to imagine and reimagine possible liberatory futures, which is something that Black folks and Afrofuturists have been doing for a long time. When I first started working with Gwendolyn Brooks and, and models and it's like, well, yes, we can generate imitation Shakespeare all day long. One of my thoughts was, let's say that the model, let's say we imbue it with this capability to resurrect voices in a way that is very computational and algorithmic, right, that, you know, what the models can do is they can pay attention to style and patterns in ways that are beyond our ability to do so. It can do that. Not that we couldn't do that on our own, but it would take a lot, right.

It would take a lot and that kind of amounts to a persona like writing a persona. You have to really know someone's inflections to kind of, like, adopt that. Um, but again, it's like, let's say that the model, let's say that we want to believe something about it that makes it very special. And that again, this idea of, like, resurrecting, possibly, or reinvigorating or giving us back something that's been lost. You see people using their, their parents' archives, so to speak, to kind of create alternate versions of their, of the family members. If it could give us back something that has been lost, what could that be? I approached it, as well, Gwendolyn Brooks. What would I want to have back is not— I would want to have Black voices back to bring those into the future. That's what I would want. Again, no offense to Shakespeare, but that's what I— but that's if you are willing to grant the models a whole lot of power. If you're willing to grant it its ability to do some kind of ancestral access, then these other things can be possible.

And so to generate text, I generated speculative stories for Maud Martha, and the prompt was like “once upon a time, Maud Martha went.” And the model - the, the Brooks version of the model - always had her going to a party. And really wild— it was wild, like the, these other possible futures for Maud Martha that were being generated, and that I thought was really fascinating. And, you know, I can’t necessarily speak to their literary quality, right. It’s like, well, this is, like, amazing writing, maybe not necessarily. But it’s very intriguing and interesting to think about what this voice might say when applied to the contemporary or future moment. If, again, we are willing to look at the model like this and some people do, right. And, and it’s, I think it’s very pleasurable to be able to— to look at the model as having this kind of oracular authority, um, at the same time, that, like, to uncritically consider it that way I think is very dangerous. But that opens up these possibilities of a model not built, you know— all these technologies, not built for Black people, not built with Black people in mind, not built with a lot of people in mind then being used to support liberatory futuristic visions I think is very fascinating.

Julian Chambliss: It strikes me that you are sort of talking about what Lonnie Brooks refers to as imaginative affordances, a way where something that’s created to do X in the hands of humans of the diaspora, they imagine a possibility for it that’s not intended, that speaks to a possible future. I have one more question for you, and it is a, a kind of open ended one, but again, you know, from your perspective. And it has to do with what questions that you wish people would ask about the intersection of, of the machine and the archive. As an artist, what questions do you want people to ask? As an editor, what questions do you want people to ask? As a student what questions do you want people to ask? As a teacher, what questions do you want people to ask? Because I, I feel like, and so I’m like, what question would you like people, you know, from those perspectives to be asking?

Lillian-Yvonne Bertram: I think it would be useful to, you know, question, what excited you about this in the first place? and what excites you about it now, if anything? You can also find a lot of surprise and a lot of joy, you know. If I were asked that question, obviously my response would be based out of my experience with it, and not everybody, obviously my experience is not universal in any way. But what is exciting about it for an artist? Or for a writer, you know, because why do this in the first place? For me, it, it goes back to the sort of history of how I’ve been working with texts to begin with. I see now that it was part of a trajectory that I had been on, why the machine could do things that I wanted to do but didn’t— could not do on my own. I cannot achieve true randomization. Neither can a computer, but it can come way closer to it than I can. I, I, that’s something I’m just not going to be able to do. But not everybody is interested in that question in, in doing, in working with randomization that way, which is, like, totally fine, right? So it is, it is an individual question, what excites you about it? Why, why do this to begin with? And I think if you asked me that question, if you asked other artists that question, you would get a similar kind of unraveling that goes back to interests in the medium as material. That goes way back to the genesis of one’s artistic practice.

Julian Chambliss: I really appreciate you taking the time to talk with me about this. I think we learned a lot. I think it’ll be really interesting for the readers of *Scholarly Editing*. So, thank you.

Lillian-Yvonne Bertram: Thank you. This was wonderful.

[credits]