eBlack: Reflections on Research Practices

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I would like to begin by expressing my thanks to
the Chesapeake Seminar and especially Scott French
and Reginald Butler for inviting me to give this
address. The Chesapeake Seminar has been a
wonderful process and I am pleased to share my
ideas with you.

The information revolution is the hot topic of the
decade, one that is not only redefining the meaning
of literacy, but the very organization of all
knowledge, as well as the way our social
institutions work. The information revolution is
actually redefining everything in three fundamental
ways: what we know, what we do, and how we
communicate.

Up to now many specialized forms of knowledge have been a scarce resource in every society, the possession of small groups. These have been the witch doctors and priests, the monks and the scientists. Knowledge as always been linked to power. Knowledge specialists have always lived and worked in places that maintained security allowing the mass public only limited access. The university comes from this tradition.

Part of this knowledge has been technique, skill in using technology to impact nature and society. These skills have also been the preserve of small groups of artisans or craftsmen who maintained control over who got trained in the skill and how it was used.

As I've said, the advent of the current technological revolution is changing things in fundamental ways. The most obvious way is that

what used to be scarce is now abundant. We have
had to deal with physical limitations. Everyone
knows the limitations of artifacts of knowledge
like books, so we have footnotes and bibliographies
that identify where additional relevant material
can be found. There are simply not enough pages in
any book. Another limitation is in the size of
libraries and storage facilities. Books are taken
off shelves and sold, or stored in warehouses to
make room for new books. Indeed, most of us here
today have this problem in our homes where rooms
increasingly double up with storage functions for
books, and hard copy collections we have gathered.

The information revolution is transforming all
forms of knowledge from atoms to bits, from
physical objects to electronic codes. This is then
subject to the limits of electronic storage and
this as we know from Moore's law has been doubling
every 18th months. The conditions for knowledge

specialists are so different now that fundamental practices of research have changed, morphed into cyberspace activity. This is what I want to talk about, research practices – old and new.

My remarks will deal with two basic questions:

1. What have been some of the most important research practices that make up Black intellectual history?

2. How are these practices being transformed on the basis of new information technologies in the new cyberspace paradigm?

Black intellectual history is rich and dynamic. It is constituted by the intellectual activity of Black people, encoded in the political culture of every day life. This includes messages in the quilts, in drum beats, and in children's stories, popular music, presentation of self strategies and aesthetic rituals of hair, dress, and body motion

style, and plain old conversation in the
vernacular.

But we are not concerned here with the spontaneous
knowledge of the people, folk knowledge, but with
formal knowledge systems, self-consciously created
systematic bodies of knowledge. In the formal
sense of the word research leads to analytically
precise bodies of knowledge, information that
serves a purpose, that when generated can be
stored, retrieved, and applied to new
circumstances.

The great tradition of research in Black
intellectual history begins in Black institutions
of higher education. This includes scholars and
librarians. To briefly recall this history I would
like to mention four great giants, the tall timber
of this research tradition: W.E.B. DuBois, Carter

G. Woodson, Charles Johnson, and E Franklin
Frazier.

DuBois and Woodson were both Harvard University
History PhDs, and Frazier and Johnson studied at
the University of Chicago in Sociology.

DuBois (1868-1963) set a high standard with his
research conferences at Atlanta University. These
conferences involved the collection, analysis, and
reporting of research findings. He envisioned a
great encyclopedia of Africa, a vision in his time
but a practical project now in the information age.

Carter G. Woodson (1875-1950) formed an
organization that anchored the profession of Black
history in community institutions (e.g. public
school teachers, journalists, and ministers), now
the ASALH. He mastered the art of the anthology,
primary documents produced by the people. And, the

historical narrative, chronology as scaffolding for the story line of Black social life.

Charles Johnson (1893-) led Fisk University to become a national center for research on what was then called "race relations." They collected data that was statistically rigorous, aimed at decoding the logic of southern life. He guided the students into community based, intensive data gathering, from life histories of exslaves to government statistics.

E Franklin Frazier (1894-1962) initiated social research on Black urban life by a life long focus on the Black family, and social class. Frazier was a research leader at Howard University for several decades.

All four of these giants were specialists in their academic disciplines, conversant with the major

theory and methods of several others, and intense advocates for social change. Their research was always linked to advocacy, and rooted in building a sustainable institutional base for scholarship and struggle.

These scholars at Fisk, Howard, and Atlanta University, along with their colleagues at those and other institutions throughout the country, forged a tradition of research. My reading of this research tradition is that there are at least five basic practices: bibliography, archiving, building data sets, setting up sustainable organizations, and theory building.

The building of a bibliography is central to all research. Research is an interconnected ever growing loosely structured process by individuals and groups that produce texts of one kind or another. Research answers questions about the

unknown, and always proceeds from what is known, hence the need for a bibliography. Every research project begins with a review of the literature.

The great example of this for Black intellectual history remains "A Bibliography of the Negro in Africa and America" compiled by Monroe Work at Tuskeegee Institute and published in 1928. There are 698 pages that contain over 17,000 references.

This project was the result of a careful plan of action. Work's biographer Linda McMurray puts it this way: "As early as December 1908 Work submitted his "Plan for Making Tuskegee a Greater Center for Information Relating to the Negro." The five-point plan specified the cataloging of current Tuskegee materals…, the building of a select library…, the systematic gathering of data…, the pursuit of research projects…, and the production of a bibliography…. …Work considered the most important

the systematic compilation of data and the
production of a bibliography."

Building archival research collections has been the
great historical contribution of Black librarians,
both the self disciplined private collector and the
institutional leader. The most eminent example of
a private collector whose collection and leadership
established an institution was Arturo Schomberg of
New York, a Black Puerto Rican. In 1925 Schomberg
sold his collection of 5,000 books and other
material to New York City. From 1933 until his
death in 1938 he was the curator of this
collection. He was succeeded by Jean Blackwell
Hutson, curator from 1949 to 1980. Women made
great strides in leadership in this area, including
by way of example Vivian Harsh in Chicago, Dorothy
Porter Wesley at Howard University's Moorland
Spingarn Collection, and Jessie Carney Smith,
librarian at Fisk University since 1965. Most

libraries that serve a Black community have some
sort of special collection that houses an archive
of some type. Social and historical research has
always stood on these collections.

There have been four basic forms of organization to
advance the practice of research: the campus based
research institute, the conference, the regional or
national research organization, and the journal.
On the campus side the major example is Charles
Johnson and the Race Relations Institute at Fisk
University.
1. annual meetings
2. scholars and activists
3. policy oriented

For the community the best example is Carter G
Woodson. Woodson formed the ASALH, and the Journal
of Negro History, with an annual conference.

Whether working on campus or in the community,

Black scholars have always maintained a

relationship between the actual and the virtual, by

attending face to face meetings as well as sharing

their research through publications.

Theory building has mainly been to clarify and

articulate the logic of social development. The

work of DuBois, Woodson, Johnson, and Frazier

weaves together as a coherent whole. The grand

narrative of the Black experience is made up of

three distinct historical stages, slavery, rural

tenancy, and urban industry. These stages are

delineated by periods of disruption and change: the

process of enslavement, the process of

emancipation, and the process of urbanization/

migration/proletarianization.

So I am arguing that the main practices have been
to construct guides to existing texts
(bibliography), to collect books and other
materials (archives), to systematically organize
facts (data sets), to share and validate knowledge
(organization), and to synthesize ideas (theory).
All of this has been organized around the printed
page, the box of stored texts, and face to face
contact. With the rise of the information
revolution things have changed. We have just begun
and already we can say that this is a fundamental
change, a paradigmatic change that places the
computer and the Internet and World Wide Web at the
heart of the process.

What I would like to do now is share some views on
how these five research practices are being
transformed in this new period. My term for this
transition is moving from Black Studies to eBlack
Studies. We are in a new period and the rules of

the game are different. The biggest thing is that
the academic playing field is more level now than
ever, and we can expect a new renaissance to
emerge. What is needed now is a wholistic strategy

My first point concerns intellectual production.
The essay is being replaced by the web page, or
perhaps it is more accurate to say that the essay
is being dramatically enhanced in a new digital
format. It moves from being a text of words
perhaps with illustrations or photographs to
include all forms of information (audio and
visual), from a static page to an interactive
medium, and from a linear narrative to a hypertext
stop on a journey determined jointly by multiple
authors and the reader. Knowledge is becoming an
exciting experience again. We are returning to the
practice of the knowledge game as total theatre
like the magicians and witch doctors of the past,
except now we can all be in the game.

It is important not to limit our thinking as we are

just entering this new period of revolutionary

transformation. We are heading to a time when what

is known will be available all the time,

everywhere, and as an integrated body of

interactive knowledge. We are just beginning this

process. The great thinker Franz Fanon reminds us

that each generation has a mission to carry out.

The most important research mission we face is to

digitize, to transform what is to a digital format.

The digital is the fundamental stuff of cyber space

the electronic environment of the web and the

Internet. Let me be clear – everything must be

digitized. We are mainly in a mechanical stage of

this process as in how we scan material from hard

copy to an electronically based computer file, even

when it is a rapid process like at JSTOR where old

journals can be rapidly digitized by the thousands

of pages. In the near future will have ubiquitous

computing and therefore the ubiquitous digitization
of all social life, mental and physical.

A couple of examples: George Rawick, historian now
deceased, collected the full set of slave
narratives and then published them as a collection
of volumes. The digitization process has just
begun. The first stage has been the selection of
key texts and posting excerpts on the web page, in
some cases with a photograph and a voice recording.
The long run task is to digitize everything, and
set up a process that hyperlinks research files to
the texts.

Even this is simply part of a more general task to
digitize all of slavery, from the US congress down
to the funky details reported in local newspapers
and personal papers of slave owners and freedmen.
We are going to bring it all back to life. I

firmly believe that digitization is the first step of a resurrection, being reborn in cyberspace.

The danger is that not everything will be digitized, and what has the greatest chance is what serves the interests and plans of funding agencies. This is a major reason why the Chesapeake Seminar is so crucial, to help launch these activities at all institutions and from the community level of popular public history. What we start here has to be sustainable and initiated to meet the needs of our communities.

A good example of this is the creation of cyber Malcolm X, a digitization of information by and about this great leader. The speeches are owned and controlled by Pathfinder Press and Malcolm's daughters. There are no collected works and much of this material is hard to find. On the other hand, the FBI has released over four thousand pages

about Malcolm on its web site of most frequently
requested files based on the Freedom of Information
Act. Today in cyberspace Malcolm is defined more
by the FBI than his own words and the experience of
his organization, movement, or community. So,
digitization is the basic action of this period –
if it aint digitized, then it aint real, bold as it
sounds this is the reality of cyberspace.

Having said this, the digitized must be accounted
for. There is a bibliography for books, a
discography for our music CD's, and now there is a
webliography for our web pages. Every eBlack
research project begins with a webliography. Most
of us are familiar with using a search engine and
how they will compile a webliography upon request.
The strengths and shortcomings of this process are
key here. On the one hand the search engines
provide a great service by helping improve access
to the rapid digitization and web page creation

that is storming the world. On the other hand this is a superficial process being done at a very low level. In the main this is being carried out on a key word recognition basis, without the ability to think about the list being compiled: what you are really interested in, and to make a distinction between serious sources of research material and popular personal hobby pages. A new business has sprung up, how to get your site in the top ten websites listed by a search engine.

In part this is being addressed by academic organizations, especially by research librarians. There are some webliographies designed for academic audiences, but even the best ones are limited by the web pages that have been developed.

1. fundamental skill to teach students

2. an expert functions to weed out the garbage and provide quality knowledge

3. KEY: careful intentional surfing is a legitimate research activity!!!

Our project in this regard is the eBlackstudies.net page that we have designed under the self imposed standard of being for the serious scholar and researcher and not the person seeking tv level edu-tainment.

To return to the research task one of the great software innovations has been tools for data base management. The emergence of Excel, Access and others has been wonderful because it has enabled a one time data entry process to give the researcher unprecedented control over the data. Official data sets like the US census are now available this way on the Web, as well as an increasing number of journals and full text on line websites.

The standard will soon be that for every article or
book one publishes in a traditional hard copy
format, one will develop a web page that includes a
data base so that the reader can interact and
determine for themselves whether your analysis is
supported by the data, and find new insights to add
to the analysis. This is already happening at
places like the Institute for Social Research at
Michigan or the Center for Race and Public Policy
at the University of Chicago. A good example is
the Bowling Alone site of Robert Putnam of Harvard
that accompanies his book by the same name on the
decline of social capital and civic engagement in
American society.

In fact today there is already the rapid growth of
electronic records that only exist in cyberspace.
The future is here.

CYBERORGANIZING is the key to bringing the future to everyone in a meaningful way. This is now being done by mainstream institutions. We see the dot com aspect of it, but it is deep and fundamental in government and education and we have to turn to the community, the public sphere.

1. activity can be simultaneous with archiving, academic and activist

2. redefine literacy and mobilize based on convergence of values - make it a moral issue, a route to freedom

3. freeware is often as good or better

4. work study

5. horizontal is more important than the vertical relationships in this process

CYBER ARCHITECTURE

The theory we have been familiar with is of two
kinds: the major narrative of the three stages and
conjunctures of social change, or threads of logic
that illustrate a theme or suggest a set of
relationships whether causal or not. There is
something much more at stake here.

1. theory is being reevaluated at its moist
fundamental level, including the basic
classification schemes, the basic paradigms.

2. The theoretical task is the architecture of
knowledge, even the nature of disciplines.

3. Black particularity must challenge a Eurocentic
universality, not on the surface of knowledge but
at its very core

VISION AND VALUE

What I have argued is happening and has really just
started can't happen from the bottom up in society
by looking for venture capitalists. Big schools
with Carnegie Research 1 ratings are a proven risk,
and in any case train the leadership. The hope for
a future safe for all of us has to be dsone from
the bottom up.

I want to end my talk with a taste of what we are
doing on Monday - basic values that also constitute
a vision, principles to advocate and
institutionalize:

CYBERDEMOCRACY: access and utilization

COLLECTIVE INTELLIGENCE: all voices

INFORMATION FREEDOM: not information for sale

My parting word is this. Imagine having an opportunity to be at any historical moment you think was important, relaly very very important. Well you cant be there, but what is even better is that you are here, the most important time in human history.

Seize the time - digitize!

go eBlack, be virtual