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 Tuskegee 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 materials..., 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 edutainment.

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 done 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