

eBlack Studies

A Twenty-First-Century Challenge

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*Each generation must, out of relative
obscurity, discover its mission, fulfill
it, or betray it.*

—Frantz Fanon, 1966¹

The information revolution is a concept that sums up a complex historical process, a process of struggle. In sum, this process is overthrowing our old ways. No sector of society, no community of people, is exempt. This includes Black studies in all its manifestations: Afrocentricity, Afrology, Afro-American and African American studies, Africana and African studies, as well as all forms of ethnic or minority studies. This article is a call for the transformation of Black studies, a move from ideology to information. My argument is that eBlack, the virtualization of the Black experience, is the basis for the next stage of our academic discipline.

The information revolution is manifest in a new reality called cyberspace, the World Wide Web, and the Internet. We inhabit cyber-

space by digitizing information about our experience, including our artistic and intellectual production, and conversations via email and chat rooms. This is the evolution of survival—if we are not digital then we do not exist. The dominant reality of the world is cyberspace. This is why the challenge of the twenty-first century is to develop eBlack as a positive force for Africa and the African diaspora. eBlack forces on a global level will represent the rebirth of Pan-Africanism and a new era of struggle against all enemies—from poverty to AIDS to antidemocratic regimes.

The impact of the information revolution can lead to a renaissance of community development, cultural creativity, and liberation politics. We need to have theoretical principles, practical projects, and a strategic plan to

create eBlack studies. In this article, I discuss three fundamental theoretical principles. Five case studies of the eBlack Studies Program at the University of Toledo are described as practical examples, models being proposed for more general adoption. Finally, I propose a strategic plan to unleash a new national trend of productivity under conditions of cooperation and unity.

From Ideology to Information

Black studies began as part of the Black liberation movement. It originated as a Black power project in higher education. The early adopters of the fight for Black studies advanced their cause based on community struggle. A second generation emerged in a career stream delinked from these struggles. They cultivated academic careers rooted in the struggle for tenure. Both generations were ideological: The founders fought the century-old Marxist–nationalist debate, and the second generation wages its debate on the terrain of the postmodernist–Afrocentrist debate.

Ideology is a form of intelligence and ignorance at the same time. Ideology easily becomes a way of life: Ideas are dogma, actions are morally sanctioned, and the role of institutions is to isolate and protect members against outsiders. We become ideological as an intellectual shortcut to freedom, as a way of organizing and joining large numbers of people to change the world. All too often adherents of one ideology show no interest in and even refuse to study other ideological positions. We appoint ourselves victors before we fight and win the war.

Although ideological struggle has persisted, the information revolution has undercut the material conditions for ideological ignorance. The information revolution has increased our capacity to produce, store, distribute, and consume all texts—written, oral,

and visual. The move from ideology (Black studies) to information (eBlack studies) is when we chose to know about not just which texts we believe but all the texts, including ones we do not believe. The information revolution requires global consciousness. This means knowing about or wanting to know about and having access to all ideas.

This move to eBlack, from ideology to information, is consistent with the profound changes taking place in other related contexts. Library schools are schools of information science, newspapers are online sources of information, and massive efforts are under way to digitize the major library collections of the world. This is the future.

Three Theoretical Principles of eBlack Studies

eBlack Studies relies on at least three theoretical concepts: cyberdemocracy, collective intelligence, and information freedom. These general principles will guide the necessary discussion and debate to win faculty and students to create eBlack.

Principle One: Cyberdemocracy. eBlack depends on everyone having access to and becoming active an user of cyber technology.

The current explosion of information technology is class based. The new concept being used to describe the growth of information rich and poor is the “digital divide.” This is a critical problem. Donna Hoffman and Thomas Novak report the following recent data.² In 1997, on a percentage basis, Blacks were 75 percent as likely to use the web as Whites, but by 1998 they were only 60 percent as likely. On the other hand, the rate of increase in these same figures indicates that from 1997 to 1998, White use increased by 62.5 percent and Black use by 75.8 percent. Blacks are not on the web as much as Whites, but it looks as if they are trying to be.

TABLE 7.1 Comparison of Recent Black-White Web Use

Date	White		Black	
	%	# Millions	%	# Millions
Spring 1997	22.4	35.2	16.6	3.9
Fall 1997	30.0	48.4	17.0	4.0
Spring 1998	35.8	60.4	21.9	5.2

The Commerce Department makes a further clarification: "Nevertheless, the news is not all bleak. For Americans with incomes of \$75,000 and higher, the divide between Whites and Blacks has actually narrowed considerably in the last year."³

The principle of cyberdemocracy is being promoted in society by a variety of forces, especially eCommerce. It is very likely that computer access will become similar to telephone access (Whites 95.0 percent, Blacks 85.4 percent). This is suggested by free email, free Internet access through institutions such as libraries and schools, and community computing centers. In higher education, cyberdemocracy is mandated to promote fundamental skills for the twenty-first century, a standard of literacy. Access is fast coming to every campus on a 24/7 basis.

Principle Two: Collective Intelligence. eBlack depends on all intellectual production being collected, analyzed, and utilized.

An elite runs Black studies, usually in a very undemocratic manner. Small handfuls of people tend to dominate the activities of each ideological network. This means we see the same names in texts, anthologies, journals, academic programs, professional organizations, invitational conferences, and annual meetings and as editors of reprints. This is a vertical structure, a hierarchy. It protects the ideology by sustaining an authoritative source and creates a more manageable market through name recognition.

There continues to be a remarkable expansion of cyberspace (Moore's Law = every eighteen months, the memory of microchips doubles and the price is cut in half). Every text of a particular type can be included in a digital library and utilized in the aggregate, for example, all African-American novels, all slave narratives, all the documented words of leaders like Malcolm X and Martin Luther King. This includes the written word and spoken and visual material as well. Everything that encodes meaning can be aggregated in a data set. This will redefine the role of scholarship. There are many examples of data sets that have never been systematically studied before: for example, graduate-level theses and dissertations at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), records of every ship involved in the slave trade, every speech given by a Black elected official during Reconstruction, and every novel written by an African American.

Principle Three: Information Freedom. eBlack depends on intellectual production being freely available to everyone.

Knowledge for sale has governed the logic of the academic marketplace. The hard-copy commercial publishers of books and journals as well as the popular press, especially the *New York Times*, have been the gatekeepers of legitimacy and the main mechanisms for knowledge distribution. eCommerce has helped to equalize this distribution through

Amazon.com and BarnesandNobles.com, but the major centers of culture and the major academic institutions will continue to dominate. Class is the best way to predict book purchases. In sum, information flows through conduits owned and controlled by big money.

On the other hand, great traditions of information freedom have been crucial for the Black freedom struggle. The most important one is the free public library. Anyone can go and read any book for free. Literacy for Black people has required information freedom more than anything else.

Now, information freedom is taking off in cyberspace. It is possible to go to the web and get any census data you need for free. The National Institute of Health has announced its intention to make all health-related scientific research available for free. H-Net has set up over 100 listservs and web sites in all disciplines of the humanities and social sciences that offer free subscriptions. Information from the radio and television is free. We need to give our system a makeover based on information freedom.

These three theoretical principles are revolutionary. All ideological tendencies and schools of thought in Black studies can embrace these principles as the basis for eBlack. We can use them to guide us through the next decade of transformation toward a unified discipline based in cyberspace.

The Toledo Model: Five Practical Projects

For the past three years we have been working to build an eBlack studies program at the University of Toledo. The importance of this is that we are similar to most places. We have only modest resources in a working-class-based urban public university. This work is an experiment in eBlack studies. Other institutions with similarly modest resources are also experimenting in eBlack

studies. More experiments will advance this next stage.

Listserv: H-Afro-Am

<http://www.h-net.msu.edu>

H-Afro-Am is edited at the University of Toledo. It is part of H-Net based at Michigan State University. H-Afro-Am was launched in 1998 as a vehicle for professional discourse in African American studies. There are over 1,000 subscribers from 25 countries. The list is free and open to everyone. It is a moderated list averaging up to ten messages a day. Faculty, students, and others use H-Afro-Am to make announcements to the field, share information about curriculum development and research, and discuss theoretical and practical issues of relevance to the Black experience. People of all ideological positions are involved, and everyone shares information.

Our goal is to have every faculty and graduate student in the field in communication via this and other related listservs. This is a necessary complement to face-to-face gatherings and more expensive forms of telecommunications such as voice and fax phone.

Distance Learning: The UG/UT Project

<http://webct.utoledo.edu>

The World Bank created the Virtual African University to send courses from the United States to Africa. At the University of Toledo, we have set up a partnership with the University of Ghana to send courses from Africa to the world. We invited Dr. G. K. Nukunya, professor of sociology and formerly pro vice chancellor of the University of Ghana, to be a visiting professor for academic year 1999–2000. He taught two courses on our campus during the fall and is currently teaching the same courses for the spring via the In-

TABLE 7.2 eBlack as a Practical Project: The Toledo Experience

	<i>Black Studies</i>	<i>eBlack Studies</i>	<i>The Toledo Experience</i>
Professional Discourse	Conferences (face-to-face discussion)	Listserv discussion lists	H-Afro-Am
Curriculum Development	Classroom-based campus courses	Distance learning	Joint project with University of Ghana
Research productivity	Hard copy publications	Research web sites	"Malcolm X": A research site
Public policy	Consulting and internships	Advocacy web sites and petitions	1998 Black Radical Congress
Community service	Volunteering in an actual community	Building a virtual community	Toledo Black Church Web Project

ternet from Ghana. We are using the WebCT software to teach "Introduction to the African Experience" and "Foundations of Culture in the African Diaspora."

Distance learning is a threat to teachers if it is used to downsize faculty and seize ownership of course materials. But it can be used to fight racism, empower Black faculty, level the academic playing field, build partnerships with community institutions, globalize education, and reverse the brain drain out of Africa.

The UG/UT project is the first project to use cyberspace in this manner. We intend to expand this to a global Pan-African studies program via the Internet. Geography, language, ideology, or institution will never again limit us.

Web Research Site: Malcolm X

<http://www.brothermalcolm.net>

Scholarship in the age of information is a public exercise. The history of Black studies, as of all academic fields, has been linked to

specific institutions that have been able to house information in archives, often under conditions of limited access. Major examples include public library collections (e.g., the Schomburg in New York or the Harsh Collection in Chicago), university archives (e.g., Fisk, Howard, University of Massachusetts, or Yale), and special research institutions (e.g., Martin Luther King, Jr. Center, and the Smithsonian). Archival material usually requires the support of major funding and acceptance into one of these institutions. W.E.B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington, Frederick Douglass, Marcus Garvey, and Martin Luther King Jr. all have major university-based archives and even digitized projects. There is no such project for Malcolm X or for any Black woman.

Since the 1960s, the University of Toledo has been engaged in a program of research, production, and advocacy about the life of Malcolm X and his legacy. There are hundreds of people all over the world as colleagues in these activities. We decided to develop a web site to share information and

establish an empirical baseline for studies of Malcolm X. This web site, based on the principles of eBlack, is now the authoritative source about Malcolm X, other than his published writings. It is only a click away for anyone online anywhere at anytime.

Our goal is to standardize the research site type of web page as a peer-reviewed formal intellectual product of eBlack studies. We hope to use the Malcolm X site as a model to build a major archive of Black intellectual history, especially the radical Black tradition. This must include all ideological tendencies and be built on the principles of eBlack.

***Black Liberation Movement:
The Black Radical Congress
(BRC), 1998***

<http://208.234.16.110/index2.html>

The 1990s included a major international conference on Malcolm X (1990), an unprecedented uprising in South Central Los Angeles and over forty other cities (1992), and the Million Man March (1996). Black radicals had not had a coordinated major national movement since the African Liberation Support Committee of the 1970s. Reformism replaced radicalism by the electoral campaigns of the 1980s and the resurgence of Black middle-class mainstream leadership. We began a process to reverse this.

What began as a couple of conversations expanded to a group that then organized thousands of activists into a process to reinvigorate Black radicalism. The main vehicle for this was a web-based source of information. Many radicals were not convinced that cyberspace was the major tool for national coordination, but the BRC web site stands as a triumph of the technology. The BRC was the first organization of any kind to create the cyber organizer as an elected position. The cyber organizer includes the duties of a

webmaster, managing the web site, and building the movement based on the principles of eBlack.

The BRC cyber activity included a listserv discussion and debate. This activity demonstrated that rather than promoting factionalism and a hardening of ideological lines, an open exchange over the most controversial and polemical issues was found by participants to be refreshing. It gathered a webliography of contemporary Black radicalism, posted official BRC documents, and posted a report (including sound and photos) of the national congress attended by over 2,000 people. The cyber action of the BRC continues under the able leadership of the Internet pioneer Art McGee.

The BRC cyber organizers turned ideology into information and built a movement of people who otherwise would not have spent the time of day with each other. We discovered that cyberactivism made the gulf between advocacy and archiving disappear. Our 1998 experience is a model for future national campaigns of Black radical activists. Our goal is to reorganize the organizational tactics of Black radicalism around the principles of eBlack.

***Community Service:
Black Church Project***

<http://www.blacktoledo.net/churches>

The Black church anchors the lives of Black people and serves as a foundation for the community. The church is total theater and includes music, lectures, ritual, pageantry, and the largest mass following of any institution. The rhetorical and organizational skills of the Black ministry are unrivaled. The Black church has been the basis for all major protest movements. When the Black church makes a commitment to recreating itself in a digital format the entire Black community will soon be online.

The University of Toledo recruited Reverend Al Reed, a local Toledo minister, to prepare a course on the Black church. This was part of an ongoing strategy to utilize local talent to diversify our program as we had done in politics, jazz, and theater. The course met every Saturday morning and focused on rereading the Black church through the lens of Black liberation theology. As a requirement for the course, each student selected a church about which to gather material for a web site. The University of Toledo has established a service called MetroNet that local nonprofit organizations can use to host web pages for free. In addition, we are part of a local community-computing program, the Murchison Center and the Community Math Academy (<http://www.murchisoncenter.org>). We are establishing a weekly workshop in which church members can learn web development software and keep their church web site updated on a regular basis.

Our goal is to get every church online via a common portal, all faiths, as a virtual ecumenical environment for Black liberation theology. Our vision is a virtual Black community. Creating this virtual world in cyberspace is a step toward recreating the actual world we live in.

Strategy for eBlack Studies

So, where do we go from here? What is a strategy to use the three basic principles and

implement the transition from Black studies to eBlack studies? We need a new course, a new concentration, and a new conception of mapping our existence in cyberspace.

We need to build on this course and create a new major by linking our curriculum to information science, through library science, business, education, computer science, or engineering. This can lead to cyber organizing becoming a concentration in eBlack Studies and route our students to exciting careers and to being able to make practical contributions to digitizing the experience of their family and community.

We need a national plan of research collaboration, state by state, to build portals for all digital formats of the Black experience, all Black-content web sites state by state. This is a vital service waiting to be done by Black studies programs. The state parameters give us a rational matrix to coordinate such a comprehensive web bibliography project. We can use federal work-study money to hire students to carry out this activity. We can also partner with local chapters of the Black Data Processing Associates, the Society of Black Engineers, the Community Technology Centers network, BRC cyber organizers, and other local information technologists such as librarians.

This is not the time to be a slave to the past. We live in a revolutionary age that will likely go far beyond our current imagination. We need a fundamentally new approach to

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the twenty-first century. This eBlack Studies proposal begins the discussion of new theory, new practice, and new strategy. Please join in this process. When we do what is necessary in cyberspace, the actual material transformation of the world will surely follow.

The time for eBlack is now.

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- Africana Studies, University of Pittsburgh <http://www.pitt.edu/~bjgrier/links.htm>
 African and African Diaspora Studies, Tulane University <http://www.tulane.edu/~adst/links.htm>
 Center for Afro-American and African Studies, University of Michigan (Ann Arbor) <http://www.umich.edu/~iinet/caas/links/index.html>
 Africana Studies Research Center, Cornell University, <http://www.library.cornell.edu/africana/index.html>
 Center for the Study of Race, Politics and Culture, University of Chicago <http://social-sciences.uchicago.edu/ucrpc/>

Digital Divide Sites

- Donna Hoffman and Thomas Novak, "The Evolution of the Digital Divide: Examining the Relationship of Race to Internet Access and Usage Over Time," <http://www2000.ogsm.vanderbilt.edu/papers.html>
 Commerce Department <http://www.ntia.doc.gov/ntia-home/ftn99/contents.html>
 Benton Foundation <http://www.benton.org/Library>
 Art McGee, Class Culture and Cyberspace <http://www.igc.org/amcgee/e-race.html>
 Abdul Alkalimat, The Technological Revolution and Prospects for Black Liberation in the 21st Century <http://www.cyrev.net/Issues/Issue4/Technological-RevolutionAndProspectsforBlackLiberation.htm>

Information Revolution Sites

- The Community Connector, School of Information, University of Michigan <http://www.si.umich.edu/Community>
 Information Technology in Africa <http://www.sas.upenn.edu/AfricanStudies/AboutAfrican/wwtech.html>

- cyRev: A Journal of Cybernetic Revolution, Sustainable Socialism and Radical Democracy <http://www.cyrev.net>
 Media Lab, MIT <http://www.media.mit.edu/>
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Notes

1. Frantz Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove, 1966), p. 167.
2. Donna Hoffman and Thomas Novak, "The Evolution of the Digital Divide: Examining the Relationship of Race to Internet Access and Usage Over Time," <http://www2000.ogsm.vanderbilt.edu/papers.html> (accessed March 16, 2000).
3. Commerce Department <http://www.ntia.doc.gov/ntiahome/ftn99/contents.html> (accessed March 16, 2000).