

**Society of American Archivists: New Orleans, August 2013**

# **Memory and Power:**

**Why diversifying the archives can help us welcome the future**

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Thank you.

First I would like to thank Bergis Jules and his committee for inviting me to make this presentation. I was greatly inspired by his work in Chicago, and his hard work to make the archives of Black intellectual history in Chicago come alive. I see myself as a living continuation of that tradition as a graduate of Jenner Elementary School (on the north side), and an alumnus of Marshal high school (on the west side) and the University of Chicago (on the south side).

It is a pleasure to speak with you about the important topic of caring for the records and documentation of who and what constitutes the historical experience of this country. First, a disclaimer – I am not a professional archivist, so I come to you without the standard inter-textuality that holds your profession to a common literature and framework. On the other hand I hope that it is useful for you to hear from someone who is clearly out of the box of archival studies because I have never been in it. However we share a common interest – what does the past have to do with the future of this country. You can tell from the title of this talk what I think.

This talk is based on my experience as a 50 year veteran professor of Black Studies and recently a cross-over into Library and information science. As a scholar activist fighting for Black liberation and social justice for all, my life has been as much a struggle about the past as it has been a struggle about the future.

So first some biographical comments by way of introduction and then a discussion of what we can call cyber resurrection vs. being born digital and how archival work in these two ways is helping us reinvent Black Studies into eBlack Studies. I hope to share with you some thoughts that can be used in the trenches of both Black Studies and archives.

I was born on the north side of Chicago in 1942. We lived in the Francis Cabrini Projects, a war workers housing development that was subsidized housing for industrial workers supporting WWII. My father worked in a steel mill producing armaments for the war effort. This housing project was a hub for political and cultural activity as a base of operations for the Chicago Communist Party because it contained industrial workers and was integrated. On the other hand we spent lots of time at my aunt's house on the south side. Thelma had four children, taught school, and was a community activist. She had graduated from Fisk University and was part of the Black art scene in Chicago working with such

luminaries as Margaret Burroughs, Alice Browning, Marion Perkins, and Gwendolyn Brooks. It is this rich cultural dynamic that kept our family history alive, and much of the credit goes to Thelma.

While our family has a documented link to Africa via oral history, our fully documented African American history begins with Frank McWorter (1777 – 1854), known as “Free Frank.” He was born into slavery from an African mother and a non-African father. His father took him from South Carolina to Kentucky where he ended up being able to hire himself out and begin an almost dual existence, he was a slave, but lived with important degrees of freedom. He accumulated enough resources to buy himself and 16 other family members out of slavery. After buying land and settling in Pike County Illinois, and being the first African American in the US to legally found a town he named New Philadelphia. His real distinction was to lead his family to fight for freedom in five specific ways:

1. His first son Frank Jr. ran to Canada from Kentucky on the Under Ground Railroad
2. He purchase his family out of slavery
3. He turned his town into a safe haven and his sons escorted people to Canada as part of the Underground railroad
4. His grandsons fought in the not so Civil War
5. His family lived free in this integrated town, including some integrated families with Black men who owned land and had guns. This was 20 miles east of the Mississippi River and the slave state of Missouri.

But this has not been in the record until relatively recently. Let’s put this in context. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century we celebrate the moral and physical struggle against slavery in this part of the country the Midwest, meaning Illinois and Missouri, by targeting the accomplishments of four white men: Elijah Lovejoy, Richard Eells, Samuel Clemons (Mark Twain), and Abraham Lincoln.

1. Elijah Lovejoy was a courageous abolitionist printer. He was murdered in 1837 in Alton, Illinois. This is a town just to the south of New Philadelphia.
2. Richard Eells was an abolitionist connected to the Underground Railroad. He was involved in a famous escape from slavery in 1842. He lived in Quincy Illinois just to the north of New Philadelphia.
3. Sam Clemons/Mark Twain (1835 – 1910) became the more conscience of the nation through his novels and essays. He was in Hannibal Missouri, on the Mississippi River 20 miles west of New Philadelphia.
4. Abraham Lincoln (1809 – 1865) reluctantly led the US into the Civil War to end slavery. He practiced law in Jacksonville Illinois in Morgan county bordering with Pike County on the east where New Philadelphia is located.

Note none of this narrative involves the self-determination agency of Black people themselves. We must remember that the accomplishments of these men and Frank McWorter were in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The good news is that the story of “Free Frank” is now moving into the national narrative. My aunt (Thelma) and her daughter (Juliet Walker, PhD in History, University of Chicago, whose dissertation under John Hope Franklin resulted in the University of Kentucky Press book titled “Free

Frank” in 1983) began this journey. The first book was published by Helen McWorter Simpson in 1981 called *The Makers of History*.

1. 1988 The grave of Free Frank was placed on the National Register of Historic Place
2. 1990 A portion of Interstate Highway was named the “Frank McWorter Memorial Highway.”
3. 2005 The town of New Philadelphia was placed on the National Register of Historic Places
4. 2009 The town became a National Historic Landmark
5. 2013 National Park Service recognizes New Philadelphia as station of Under Ground Railroad
6. 2013 A bill has been introduced into Congress for a National Park designation to preserve and develop New Philadelphia as an important site of US history.

We are slowly correcting the record. There are archival collections on the McWorter family now in the following institutions:

1. The local library and museum of Barry Illinois, the closest town to New Philadelphia where Frank McWorter was a member of the First Baptist Church
2. The Lincoln Presidential Library in Springfield Illinois
3. The Vivian Harsh Collection of the Chicago Public Library
4. The National Afro-American Museum & Cultural Center in Wilberforce Ohio
5. And soon to be in the new Smithsonian institution, The National Museum of African American History and Culture

This makes me think about the recent story about southern cooking. This white woman named Paula Deen had become a great renowned, and I might add wealthy cook, had been pimping Black women for their recipes and kitchen production work, paying them minimum wage – for decades! She maintained racist practices as part of the Southern tradition. She was exposed and driven off TV. Whether in cooking or the freedom struggle we have not been telling the truth in this country, and this generalization is part of my message – it’s time to start telling the truth about ourselves and the experiences that make up the actual history of this country.

But, boy oh boy, do we have a job to do. Fundamentally the reason is that we are a country that can serve as a good example of the historical crisis of memory we face on a global level. We have at least five basic dichotomies we have to confront, understand, and transform in consciousness and in repairing the barbaric impact of generations of exploitation and oppression at the highest level of any society on earth!

1. The US started a settler colony that practice genocide against the indigenous population
2. The US practiced slavery against mainly Africans
3. The US imposed its imperial domination on South and Central America (and Mexico) and the Caribbean with the Monroe Doctrine, extending to the Philipines and Hawaii.
4. The Civil War and subsequent developments left the South as a backward region run by a legacy of racism from the traitorous Confederacy
5. The capitalism in this country has murdered and starved workers while capitalists “live large”

And there are many other dialectics of marginalization based on gender, generation, and being physically and mentally challenged.

In each case we have a crisis of memory? Do we really remember what the indigenous population experienced? How about the slaves? And those dominated by US imperialism (like Cuba from 1890's to 1959)? What about the working class and poor people everywhere, but especially the South where Black people are concentrated? Power remembers history that serves it needs to remain in power, but that must come to an end. This is the crisis of the practice of building and using archives. Power has the money to have archives and they require them to be constructed as apology for their power, and not to attack and reconstruct the historical polarities that I have just mentioned.

We can turn to the history of Black Studies and review the great 20<sup>th</sup> century uprising that helped us begin to change, a process we have to continue in this 21<sup>st</sup> century. We have had to struggle for a new historiography from a Black perspective. We have had to focus on voice, agency, ideology, and the legitimacy of oral history.

1. One of the great contradictions of historical evidence about slavery is the distinction between the diary accounts of slave holding families or their European guests versus the slave narratives and autobiographies
2. Another of course is the practice of emphasizing white innovation while silencing innovative Black Self Determination. An example of this is to anoint Melville Herskovits as the father of African Studies at Northwestern University when his work had been preceded by scholars at Fisk University and Howard University. Then Black scholars had to go through him to get legitimacy and financial support for their research.
3. Black nationalism has been marginalized as un-American while white nationalism has been embraced as the American way – thus creating a love it or leave it syndrome, and of course these options are clarified by the names Clarence Thomas and Malcolm X.
4. Finally the autobiography and oral history is the traditional way that Black people have told their truths to the world. The subjectivity of Black people is as much a vital and legitimate gateway to the past as any other set of documents. This is one of my basic contentions.

Black Studies has been based on accepting the challenge to create a Black perspective on historical experience via a new approach to voice, agency, ideology, and oral history. Now I would like to discuss our experience with two approaches to archiving the past, present, and future. We face two data dynamics. The cyber resurrection of all actual existing collections, the artifacts and hard copies that fill libraries, archives and museums on the one hand, and all that is born digital, on the other.

Cyber Resurrection of actual existing collections

Our major application of digital technology to Black Studies led us to coin the term “eBlack Studies.” At the heart of this digital transformation of our discipline we summed up our guiding principles as Cyberdemocracy, Collective Intelligence, and Information Freedom.

1. Cyberdemocracy is about ending the digital divide in terms of access, skill, and use of digital technology
2. Collective intelligence is accepting the new reality of big data, but on our terms so that the community and listen to every voice and make sure every major point of view is factored into all discourse, ending the many silences that afflict the society
3. Information freedom is about ending the commodification of our intellectual and cultural heritage

The main way our scholarship can embrace these values is to use the methodology of what we call the Seven D's:

Definition of the research question and related literature

Data collection that is both qualitative and quantitative

Digitization of all data

Discovery of patterns in the data to confirm or reject hypotheses

Design of presenting the scholarship from posters to articles or books

Dissemination to audiences of interest

Differences that the research can make for individuals and communities

This is the framework for our work. One of our major projects has been eBlack CU, a digital online archive of the Black experience in Champaign-Urbana Illinois, including the University of Illinois.

Champaign-Urbana (twin cities) are located in east central Illinois. The 2010 census reports a combined population of 122,305 with nearly 19,405 African American residents, roughly 16% of the population. African Americans have lived in the cities since 1850, and while there are many neighborhoods that have been integrated a number of census tracts in North Champaign are over 50% Black. Black people identify this as the Black community and call it "the North End."

Champaign is home to the University of Illinois, the largest employer in the county. We got BTOP funding to build high speed Internet capacity, combining Federal, state, and local funds of over \$30 million. Our project was initiated with this new capacity in mind.

During our initial field work we discovered that large amounts of cultural heritage information were placed online by community members, primarily through Facebook. For example, a middle aged woman in her late fifties on her own latched onto Facebook as a vehicle to make digital content on the community and its history available to everyone. She loaded 8,951 images to Facebook, including both documentation of present community events (including digitized programs, photographs, and newsletters) and historical photographs.

There are also Facebook groups that have developed "You know you grew up in..(a place)..if..(something to remember). These pages aggregate people together who remember living in a certain place. One Champaign-Urbana page has 4,000 members of all ethnicities.

Two African Americans got involved and each set up such a page for Black memories, and one got 500 members, the other 250. These sites are about an organic process of memory production, a form of digital oral history.

At the start of the project, our team had weak ties to the local African American community, making it imperative in the first phase of the project to spend time at community sites to build trust, one of the dimensions of social capital. Field work carried out at a historic African American church and then also at a historic center of business and culture, and both of these experiences enabled the project to build stronger connections to the community. Further, we organized a campus community symposium that brought together over 200 people. In two years we had digitized over 75,000 pages and 200 hours of multimedia.

Our project – eBlack CU – uses the Omeka software package. This requires a high level of digital skill that is not the norm in community informatics, and requires specialized skill. We are dealing with people who find it practical to use Face book pages to build online compilations or what might call community based archival digital libraries. These local community archives are about family, church, community groups, and school class reunions. So spontaneously, people are grabbing the low hanging fruit, easy to use social media, in order to digitize, store, and make available archival documents. The archival crisis is about time and sustainability – how long will the digital files be preserved and what will happen to the original hard copy documents?

We had to do something that would have the content capacity of the Omeka site, and the ease of use as a Facebook page. Furthermore, the outsourcing of the archival process (from Omeka to Facebook) back into the hand of the community is a critical part of how we have been successful in our project thus far.

Knowledge Commons Born Digital – CU local wiki

The masterpiece of software for the public uploading content for public use is Wikipedia. What is Wikipedia? The short answer is that it is a new online encyclopedia outsourced to all of us. We write it and update it on a daily basis; hence it is a new democratic format for creating knowledge. It is the new logic of from all of us to all of us, and that's why the corporations and the elites are dissing it so much. If the people can do things on their own, then we can begin to reorganize the rest of society around this logic of bottom up to replace what we have now which is top down.

Our needs led us to how the wiki software can be used to create a living encyclopedia for a local community, the local wiki. Now we had what we needed, a place for maximum storage space for digital files, and easy to learn software with great potential for public participation. There were local wiki projects popping up all over in this country as well as around the world. Every community wants to remember itself and people started to look to wiki as the platform for remembering.

We followed our practice with eBlack CU. A group of campus and community activists called a meeting at the local library and about 20 people showed up and expressed interest. This was a diverse group, hence had a good community feel. More meetings were called, a couple of classes got involved and the

students had assignments to add wiki entries, and a couple of grad students became unofficial local wiki staff.

### Concluding thoughts

Ok, so now let's return to our main theme and begin to sum up. We set out to argue that diversifying the archives, that is rethinking the past and making adjustments in the records of data that define the past, will help us welcome the future. This is a fundamental question.

First, the very people who have been the most marginalized and impoverished are the ethnic flavors that are going to be a majority of the US population. This is already true for new-born children in the US (meaning everyone less than one year of age) where there is already a Black-Latino majority. So the future of this country is clearly in the direction of non-European descendents from Asia, Africa and Latin America.

This is the key question – what will the archives tell this new majority emerging in the near future about their legitimacy as citizens of this country based on the experiences of their ancestors?