"Black to the future: Libraries, technology, and the development of African-American studies" in "Rare book and manuscript libraries in the twenty-first century, Session two: Rare book and manuscript libraries as centers for research and teaching"

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Black to the Future:
Libraries, Technology, and the Development
of African-American Studies

Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Michael Roy

The W. E. B. Du Bois Institute for Afro-American Research at Harvard annually invites roughly twelve scholars to be in residence for the year at the Institute. As we were preparing for this talk and trying to conjure an anecdote that would bring home the somewhat theoretical point that we had hoped to make this morning—that new technologies enable and force the scholarly community to ask new questions of their subject area—we were interrupted by a request from one of the incoming fellows. One of the hardest things about going away to study is deciding which books and papers to bring with you from your usual place of research. We continually are asked how much space will be allotted for storing books; will the Institute pay for shipping materials; what materials are already available at the Institute? This new fellow—a graduate student completing his dissertation at Temple—wanted to know not how many books could he or should he bring, but whether we would pay for the transference and maintenance of a computer bulletin board that he runs out of his study at Temple. This was exactly what we were searching for—a crude example of the different sorts of questions that arise as different methods of conducting intellectual work are employed. We agreed to the request, and the Du Bois Institute is now host to an ongoing electronic forum on current issues in African-American studies.

In the past two years, two developments in the world of computer technology have revolutionized the world of academic computing: new computer chips that greatly speed the processing of information, and affordable storage devices that allow individuals to store massive amounts of data on their own computers. More and more information is being collected, organized, and disseminated electronically, and the scholar without a microcomputer on her desk is becoming the exception rather than the rule. For most scholars, these machines are little more than sophisticated typewriters. However, as online services become more extensive and user-friendly, as some information becomes available only through electronic means, as scholars discover the powerful uses to which these machines can be put both in organizing the material they have collected and in presenting this material in dynamic new forms, we will see these machines being used in myriad ways: to "download"—an ugly, unpalatable word, let us say, but one we are forced to use—searches from the library online catalog, to organize bibliographic information, to share work in progress with colleagues. It is becoming increasingly clear that we are on the brink of a brand new way both of conducting scholarship and of
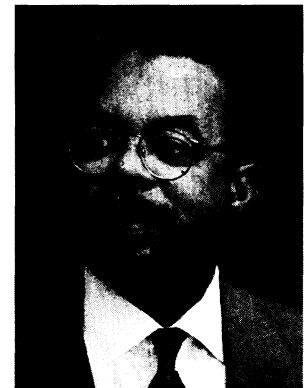
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disseminating the results of this scholarship. What we would like to talk about this morning is how we are managing this transformation in a variety of projects that are taking place under the auspices of the Du Bois Institute. Clearly, many of the research implications for African-American studies overlap with those of many other disciplines, since African-American studies is by its nature interdisciplinary. Still, there are specific problems and concerns—as well as benefits for the field— that result from its unique intellectual history and perspective. The various research projects taking place at the Du Bois Institute use computers primarily in three ways: to collect information, to organize information, and to disseminate the results of research. By looking at some of these projects and the ways in which they employ new technologies either to speed their research or, in some cases, to make their research possible, one can see both the immense potential these machines offer, and also the various assumptions about the nature of academic research that must be accounted for as the libraries for which these materials are prepared enter into the twenty-first century.

The *Guide to African-American and African Primary Sources at Harvard University and Radcliffe College*, compiled by Elizabeth Sandager and published in a print version in February 1992, was a collaborative project between the Harvard libraries and the Du Bois Institute. It is, as its title suggests, a guide providing greatly improved access to the many holdings at Harvard and Radcliffe relevant to African and African-American studies that, due to the lack of bibliographic tools, were often overlooked by scholars and students. Much of the collection of data was achieved electronically by downloading records from HOLLIS, and the entire guide was organized using a fairly simple database program. The printed guide is organized alphabetically by title with 472 separate entries, with an index at the end both by subject and by repository. While desktop publishing software was used to prepare it for publication, and new technologies speeded the process of putting this guide together, it is in many ways a very traditional finding aid. The *Guide*, however, is envisioned as being most useful once it has been made available in electronic form. The decision to publish a print version draws attention to one of the stickiest points that arise as the pressure to publish electronically increases. By taking advantage of the powerful search strategies enabled by the database, an electronic version of the *Guide* will enhance access to the collections. However, for most scholars and students today, the most useful form of publication is still the book. As the population becomes more computer-literate, and most users of bibliographic and research tools expect electronic editions of published works, at what point does the scholar stop publishing in print form altogether? Given that not all libraries, and certainly not all individuals, will be able to finance the acquisition of high-tech equipment, what are the implications of pursuing cutting-edge research projects if the results of these projects may not be accessible to all?

A second project undertaken jointly by the Harvard libraries and the Du Bois Institute is the Harvard Guide to African-American History. It is, like the *Guide to Primary Sources*, being organized electronically, but it, too, will be published in a print version. An electronic version would allow for an annual updating to keep the Guide current with contemporary research, a feature that the economics of print publication will not allow. This project, unlike the *Guide to Primary Sources*, makes no claim to being exhaustive. Its virtue and value are that it is a selection of those materials deemed central to the field of African-American history by the

leading authorities in the field. One of the problems with exhaustive lists of secondary materials is that the act of compiling—or reading—such lists often takes so long that the materials themselves never are read. With the advent of electronic catalogs and the ability to download records from these catalogs, there will no doubt develop an entire industry surrounding the production and dissemination of increasingly longer lists of books and articles. While the texts to which the entries refer may never be read and still perform the professional work of winking to that group of scholars whose books one is obliged to refer to, we will no doubt also begin to see lists that are compiled but not used by researchers. The problem of who has the institutional authority to create a selected bibliography does not evaporate with the automation of bibliographical construction. Quite the opposite. As in so many things, the computer does not obviate drudgery. In many cases, it replaces one form of drudgery with another.

It does, however, greatly speed up certain forms of drudgery. A case in point is the recently published *Black Biographical Dictionaries: A Cumulative Index*, a collection of 30,000 biographical sketches of African-Americans culled from over 300 sources. When it began over twenty years ago, the project employed the most modern of technologies: notecards and carbon paper; as the scope and number of sketches grew, the amount of material became unwieldy to the point where work was suspended. Finally, the process of indexing and accounting was transferred to a database program, and the resulting product—a microfiche edition with a hardcopy index—looks very similar to the product envisioned, but unrealizable, twenty years earlier. And since the index was generated by a database program, an electronic index will be published within the year.

Although we have spoken in the previous three examples about how these new technologies enable scholars to perform traditional forms of research more efficiently—improving the speed of publication, the complexity of bibliographical compilation and searching—there are many who argue that the transformation of the scholarly world from a print environment to an electronic environment is not simply part of the continued rationalization of the academy into further and further specialized sub-fields, but marks rather what Thomas S. Kuhn referred to as a paradigm shift: the computer enables whole new fields of inquiry to be pursued, not merely in the sciences, but also within the social sciences and the humanities. With the recent emergence of African-American studies and cultural studies within the academy, it is not clear to us that one can speak of a paradigm shift within fields that are still very much in the process of debating what the terms of critical debate should be. Regardless of how one chooses to think about the epistemological effect of the development of this new technology, African-American studies, with its explicitly interdisciplinary approach to the study of African-American experience, is in our view uniquely poised to take advantage of the revolutionary abilities these machines promise to deliver. While the newer applications—true multimedia and virtual reality—are too new for us to predict their uses in an educational context, we have been watching developments in the field, waiting to enter only once we are confident that the industry standards have at least partly stabilized. We look to projects like Gregory Crane's Perseus project, which originated at Harvard, and George Landow's work at Brown developing hypertext documents that analyze literary texts, as potential models for our future projects. Some of the editors for the forthcoming *Norton Anthology of African-American*

Literature have been pressing for the inclusion of a cassette that would include some of the classic jazz and blues that make up a central segment of the cultural heritage of African-Americans. In a multimedia future, an electronic version of the anthology would allow for the inclusion of film clips and musical selections as well as traditional text. With source "books" of material collected from a variety of media and made available to scholars and students, scholarly work would be able to "quote" directly not only from a written text, but also from film and televisual and audio sources. One such application, already developed by Apple Computers, is the complete text of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I have a dream" speech. As the reader moves through the text, at any point she can highlight a word or sets of words, and in a box on the screen the video of the speech will appear. The rhetorical force of King's speeches clearly cannot be fully grasped without actually hearing them spoken, since they were written to be heard. This is what is commonly referred to as a "speakerly text." While such applications are presently terribly expensive and require massive amounts of computing power, within a decade's time we are certain that it will be not only possible but necessary to use these technologies in the course of one's research, publishing, and teaching.

Part of what we do at the Du Bois Institute is try to imagine what African-American studies will do in the next ten or twenty years. We have put together ideas for projects that, while not yet economically feasible, and without an audience (how many of you have CD-ROM drives and can afford a $500 CD?), may very well be realizable within the next twenty years.

The Black Periodical Literature Project, another project run by the Du Bois Institute, has directly benefited from many of the recent transformations in computer technology. The project began twelve years ago at Yale, where a group of faculty members and graduate students began keeping notecards and making photocopies of literary material culled from the African-American periodical press. One of the major obstacles that faces scholars wishing to work in African-American history and letters is the lack of primary source material. Unlike other disciplines, it is not enough to produce new readings of old texts. Part of the work of the scholar of African-American literary history by necessity has been to recover the lost literary heritage that has helped to shape the literary landscape of our country. The problem of preservation is not unique to African-American studies. As we are sure you are all aware, our country's literary heritage faces a major crisis, not from the literary left that wishes to eliminate all notions of hierarchy and value, but from the *paper* on which nearly all books were printed from 1850 to the recent past, more than 80 million volumes, a quarter of the nation's holding, or 2.5 billion pages. There are hard decisions that have to be made, for the books are deteriorating at a faster rate than they can be preserved. Innovative attempts are being made at some of our country's finest universities—Yale and Cornell in particular—to preserve not the physical texts themselves, but an electronic image of the texts that would make the intellectual content of the books available long after the physical text crumbles away. This particular crisis takes on new urgency for those of us whose commitment to preserving the African-American literary tradition first necessitates the identification of those texts that were in fact produced by African-Americans.

The work of the Black Periodical Literature Project is two-fold. It is a preservation project, producing both a hardcopy and a microfiche copy of the literary material it identifies. And it is a project that seeks to improve access to this material

by publishing an index to it. The majority of material we work with comes to us on microfilm. The microfilm reader/printer that we own employs digital technology to produce an astonishingly good hardcopy of the microfilm image, and from that hardcopy we produce the microfiche edition.

The microfilm reader, since it employs digital technology, could—with the addition of a computer workstation—produce image-files that we could then publish electronically, either on CD-ROM or magnetic tape. As optical character recognition software improves, these image files could be converted into full-text files, shrinking both the amount of space they occupy on the storage device, and vastly improving their utility. A student or scholar could then do key-word searches throughout the entire database, retrieving those records that refer to a particular event or person or a particular string of words. For the time being, we have decided not to pursue that particular path, partly due to the economics of publishing 50,000 image-files, each of which occupies nearly half a megabyte of memory, but also because of our commitment to producing a research tool that is democratic, a tool that is accessible to the largest audience.

We publish a hardcopy index to the microfiche that indexes the material by standard bibliographical details (author, title, place of publication, date of publication, page, column), and also by genre (fiction, poetry, literary notice, and book review). The index is published both by title and by author. Within the year, we will begin publishing the index electronically. At the project's office, we use an in-house version of the electronic index quite regularly. Students and scholars who come to us asking questions about a particular author or a particular place or a particular date remind us that the results we generate in the course of a two-minute search of our database would have taken them weeks, and in some cases they would never have even thought to try to find an answer to their query. For example, one student preparing his dissertation on representations of the Fourth of July in African-American literature came to us looking for material published either on or around the Fourth. With a few keystrokes, we produced for him an extensive list of citations that he was then able to go directly to on the microfiche. As part of our work in developing an organizational principle by which to publish selected materials from the project's findings, we have searched the database by genre along a time axis. We found that as one moves further and further into the twentieth century, the ratio of book reviews and literary notices to poems and pieces of fiction increases. With the aid of this tool, one can begin to see patterns and sets of patterns, and one is forced to make judgments about the significance of a particular trend that one notices. Does this replace the work of close reading? Is this an invalid approach to literature?

If our future—like it or not—lies in electronic books and the cyberlibrary, there still remains the lingering problem of how to preserve our print-dominated past. A case in point is a collection held by the Harvard College Library, the papers of Roscoe Conkling Simmons. These papers, occupying 52 cubic feet and in various stages of deterioration, document the life of Simmons, whose role in Republican politics earlier in the century brought him into contact with many of the major political figures of this century, black and white. The collection, cataloged only incompletely, offers a wonderful opportunity to combine the most innovative preservation techniques—scanning the marvelously rich collection of photographs and ephemera, digitally remastering badly damaged phonographs, creating fully searchable text-files of Simmons's correspondence and his many speeches—with the

Richard Wendorf, left, speaking with Brook Manville and Skip Gates.

most sophisticated access tools: relational databases, hypertext links, and the ability to produce ongoing annotations and citations for the collection.

One can imagine a library where all of these files are stored, accessible via modem from throughout the world. Will the next generation of fellows at the Du Bois Institute never appear in person, but rather dial-in? Will our letters of invitation to become a fellow include a code that enables the fellow/end-user to access the Du Bois Net? As admitted and unashamed fetishizers of books, we are loathe to imagine a future without the experience of handling a physical text. And we believe there are enough people like ourselves to keep the paper book industry printing books well into the next century. But, as both students and scholars of African–American studies, we are thrilled by the potential these new technologies offer our field, both for preserving the rich cultural heritage of our nation, and for improving the access to and understanding of this heritage.