

Perspective: In the Time of COVID-19 | Still Black See

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"Each body has its own art."

—*Gwendolyn Brooks*

The African American body is a symbol of art, curiosity, and degradation in one breath in these United States based on history. A quick review: African American people have had to endure a plethora of pandemics beginning with the institution of slavery and being forced upon the waters of the Atlantic Ocean to enter the United States in 1619 by way of the Middle Passage. It took years before Emancipation happened because Black folks had to use their bodies as tools of art for 400 years to prove that they were human enough for a moment.

Painting slowly, let's use the colors red, white, and blue on the canvas and spell out these movements including Reconstruction, The Great Migration, Jim Crow, The Civil Rights Movement and now Black Lives Matter. Noted author Ta-Nehisi Coates in his scholarship *Between the World and Me*, (2015) unapologetically exerts that African Americans have continued to be viewed by their bodies and how much they can withstand as outcasts in society. I was taught to teach those who do not know regardless of their race, because if they do not know the truth about these United States then who is to blame. As a Black writer, librarian, archivist, and gallerist my professional role in society revolves around a global creative kaleidoscope encompassing art, books, literature, and technology. Everything about my being has dealt with studying history, publishing, collecting,

and archiving and preserving African American history using digital technology as a resource and tool for lifelong learning.

History repeats itself and many have come before me who documented the lives of Black people during national pandemics. To name a few: Allen LeRoy Locke, Arturo Schomburg, W.E.B. Dubois, Charles S. Johnson, and Augusta Savage. The majority of the scholars mentioned were practitioners of creativity as well as being social advocates for change. This article looks at different eras where African American voices and bodies were uplifted through the arts, publishing, and archives using technology as its platform for communication during calamity in the United States and why it is important that this tradition continues during COVID-19 and in the new decade.

The human condition from a global standpoint will never be the same as of March 2020. According to American Public Media, "1 in 920 Black Americans has died (or 108.4 deaths per 100,000)."¹ Most importantly, 44,000 African Americans have lost their lives, making up 20% of the population who have contracted COVID-19, and are only 12.4% of the American population. These numbers are updated monthly via their website. Not to mention, African Americans have been murdered on a daily basis in these streets by police officers. Additionally, there is a major digital divide going on in the United States as mentioned by the Pew Foundation's new analysis of Pew Research Center data collected in early April. "Roughly six-in-ten parents with lower incomes said it's likely their homebound children would face at least one digital obstacle to doing their schoolwork."² Meanwhile, systematic racism puts pressure on Black bodies, and when we, they, she, him, over there resists, our body and voices are dismantled by any means necessary. Even still in the midst of darkness there is light.

This is what African American documentarians, archivists, collectors, and bibliophiles have set to accomplish since the beginning of time, defining and creating a legacy through archives of Black history. During these times, galleries, libraries, archives, and museums (GLAM) need to create innovative modes of information to share using digital technology as their medium for communication with the global community. There are two entities that will be introduced in this perspective including ART | library deco and Data for Black Lives that are making a difference through creativity, data, history, and technology in the 21st century. Given these points, about documentation, let's go back briefly and look at the early 20th century examples of how technology was utilized by some of the scholars in this article.

During the beginnings of the Great Depression in the late 1920s, African Americans in the southern region of the United States participated in the largest movement in American history: The Great Migration. Black people left the south in droves after being subjected to Reconstruction and the birth of Jim Crow. These visionaries wanted a new way of life for themselves and their families and trekked to Chicago, New York, and even Philadelphia. By the same token, African

Americans in Harlem, New York, were creating a flow of artistic valor through the Harlem Renaissance which trickled over into like-minded communities in the Midwest, East, and West and back down South.

Alain LeRoy Locke was a philosophical architect, promoter of African American artists and a major publishing and curating figure during the Harlem Renaissance and created an art archive about African American art history. W.E.B. Du Bois, another prominent African American scholar, founded *The Crisis*, the official publication of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Charles S. Johnson followed in the footsteps of his mentor and used his entrepreneurial genius to found *Opportunity: Journal of Negro Life*, the literary and political voice of the National Urban League. Both of these publications in my humble opinion paved the way for unknown emerging Black authors, writers, artists, and social advocates in a time of uncertainty, comprising the vocations of Langston Hughes, Augusta Savage, Romare Bearden, Gwendolyn Bennett, and Aaron Douglas. Their art defined the signs of the times and they figured out a way most of all regarding how to share it with the public.

The most significant body of work that set the tone for the 20th century is W.E.B. Du Bois' *Data Portraits: Visualizing Black America*. It is the first complete body of work featuring data portraits of groundbreaking charts, graphs, and maps presented at the "The Exhibit of American Negroes"³ at the Exposition Universelle of 1900 documenting the educational, historical, social, and cultural and population growth in the state of Georgia 37 years after the end of slavery in the United States. According to the scholar:

"Thus all art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy. I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda. But I do care when propaganda is confined to one side while the other is stripped and silent."

—W. E. B. Du Bois (1987)

From a historical perspective, the Civil Rights Movement emerged in the early 1900s in the United States and from an artistic point of view, the body of work of Arturo Alfonso Schomburg, an African American intellectual, emerged into a forever collection of Blackness archived in the New York Public Library's Schomburg for African American Research and Culture in Harlem, New York.

On another block, sculptor, and Director of the Harlem Arts Community Center, Augusta Savage developed a haven for students, emerging artists, and writers through the Federal Art Project, a branch of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), specifically tailored to the visual arts and artists who were unemployed during the Great Depression. W.E.B. Du Bois' body of work included how African Americans fared post slavery and lives on through this era and why this work

and its place in history as a guide to learn how to document a community's narrative using data technology through imagery is valid. Not to mention, African Americans have been collecting and archiving their personal heirlooms and memorabilia for centuries. However, they have not had the space to archive and preserve their artifacts due to social, cultural, and economic issues. In like manner, these documents have not been readily available to the public until the 1960s in GLAM spaces. For what reason? Again, systematic racism and cultural, organizational, and social ideologies have been the precursor to deem what is archival worthy, as well as the narrative about Black history is typically told through the guise of a White archivist or librarian. Nonetheless, this shows how African Americans specifically and anyone else willing to pick up the torch in pursuit of Black excellence and create and advocate for change using digital technologies as the vehicle for communication.

"We've got to tell the unvarnished truth"

—*John Hope Franklin*

Can I ask you a question? What year were you born? If I told you five years ago that the new decade would begin with the death of Kobe Bryant and his daughter and others tragically losing their lives in a helicopter crash and from that point on a global pandemic (COVID-19) would take over the world; what would your response have been as an information professional? We are right back where we started. It's all about documentation and capturing the moment and how librarians, archivists, creatives, and social influencers, curators, and publishers are able to think outside the box and visualize the future. This is what African American innovators of the 20th century did in order to get the word out about the unvarnished truth regarding the plight of Black people during times of calamity in the United States. To recapitulate, have you answered the question that started this paragraph, because if such a thing should happen, and it did (COVID-19), and here we are; the instrument in the 21st century once again is technology. By extension, there are outlets in the 21st century that have taken the torch passed down through the heartbeats of innovators mentioned earlier to tell the narratives of Black people through print matter, virtual, podcasts, and satellite radio. What a time it is to be alive as a creative and to be able to tap into digital technology, virtual reality, and social media platforms that advocate for change in galleries, libraries, archives, and museums.

ART | library deco, "sweet as the moment when art went pop," was created during my graduate school practicum fellowship at the Museum of Fine Arts Houston, Hirsch Art library and the Houston African American Museum of Culture (HMAAC) in Houston, Texas. The online African American digital art library archives the visual experience of art, literature, and history through the eyes of artists and institutions in the United States and abroad. Using digital technology to create archives, exhibitions, collections, events, and curate art

news for patrons to access daily. The digital library features an online African American art lib-guide, a digital art repository, and a virtual exhibition space.

As the chief curator, I felt compelled to develop an archive of stories of African Americans who have something to say about their experience during COVID-19. Selected data, stories, images, audio, and videos will be published online in our digital journal and all submissions will be archived in our public access repository in 2021. Equally important, as a librarian and archivist, I believe that it is ever so important in this moment that you take an oath as a creative to become a lifelong learner and advocate for change for all communities. Through my own journey, I have had to ask myself the same questions that I posed to you earlier. Personally, I took some time this year to check out Data 4 Black Lives, another organization using digital technology and making a difference during COVID-19 and going into the future regarding archiving African American history using digital technology as its platform.

As Founder and Executive Director, Yeshimabeit Milner is the chief architect, strategist, and visionary of the Data for Black Lives Movement: Data as protest. Data as accountability. Data as collective action. Data 4 Black Lives, "...is a movement of activists, organizers, and mathematicians committed to the mission of using data science to create concrete and measurable change in the lives of Black people. Since the advent of computing, big data, and algorithms have penetrated virtually every aspect of our social and economic lives. These new data systems have tremendous potential to empower communities of color. Tools such as statistical modeling, data visualization, and crowd-sourcing, in the right hands, are powerful instruments for fighting bias, building progressive movements, and promoting civic engagement."⁴

The organization during the time of COVID-19 has been an avid social influencer on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook about their mission and how they want to help and are doing so by example in real time. As an organization that is solely online, they host an array of events online, host data courses via social media, and the organization features a call to action that emphasizes specific unmet needs in the Black community across the United States. Currently, Data 4 Black Lives is working on an action plan to make every state release information about race data, that is, deaths by race, and states that have yet to publicize this data. Anyone who is interested in learning more about COVID-19 statistics regarding the African American community will also have access to the organization's research reports and pandemic data. In a time of uncertainty, these are two entities from a digital perspective that are paving the way for the future regarding archiving the arts and African American cultural history and documenting interactive data to preserve the narratives of African Americans in the United States.

Technology looks different each time a new version is released in any medium. In the case of scholarly creatives and their use of technology and communicating

with their audiences, the present moment is a pivotal one. The intent of this article is to make those who are unaware aware of the use of digital technologies in the 20th century from an African American perspective through publishing and archiving, as well as community art spaces.

At this moment, in the same pursuit of excellence there are creative scholars, researchers, etc., who are making a difference by providing information through the arts and data to show in real time what is taking place in Black communities using digital technology as their mode of communication. Theaster Gates, social practitioner of installation art and Professor in the Department of Visual Arts at the University of Chicago firmly asserts, "Sometimes the creating that we do is creating a platform that allows other creative people to pitch in." Anyone at this time in history can be innovative, collaborative, and create new ways of communicating with the world using digital technology all the while developing agendas to produce solutions and outcomes that bring about change. And, this should be our mission as creative information professionals. Sometimes, it takes going back to the past to understand the future.

Still Black See.

Holla Black @ kYmizsofly via Instagram

NOTES

1. APM Research Lab Staff. n.d. "The Color of Coronavirus: COVID-19 Deaths By Race and Ethnicity in the U.S." American Public Media Research Lab. Accessed December 1, 2020. <https://www.apmresearchlab.org/covid/deaths-by-race>
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3. Provenzo, Jr., E. F. "Paris 1900 The Exhibit of American Negroes, World's Fair (Exposition Universelle)." An Historical and Archival Reconstruction. Accessed November 30, 2020. <https://web.archive.org/web/19991022052652/http://129.171.53.1/ep/Paris/home.htm>
4. Data for Black Lives. n.d. "About Us." Data 4 Black Lives. Accessed November 21, 2020. <https://d4bl.org/about.html>

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