

What Is Journal Work?

Reinventing *The Black Scholar*

Louis Chude-Sokei

Though a student of literary and cultural modernism where journals were as rife as the movements that generated them and as exciting as any experimental novel, poem, or note played on the cusp of postimprovisatory freedom, I have held very little stock in academic journals. This might have something to do with the fact that my work and that of those whom I regard highly have never often or easily been accepted by journals until becoming valuable elsewhere or unignorable by other means. Sour grapes, of course, are easily sweetened on realizing that these rejections say less about the nature and quality of the work than about how contemporary scholarly journals have functioned as a socializing and disciplining presence and as a sometimes-painful reminder of the processes of institutionalized knowledge production.

Journals like Wyndham Lewis's *Blast* and W. E. B. Du Bois's the *Crisis*, as well as others like the *Little Review*, the *Masses*, and even Harlem's ill-fated *Fire!!!*, are rightly credited with ushering in or sustaining that wider critical climate and sensibility we call modernism. This was a climate that despite incestuous in-groups, intense intellectual and ideological policing, and obsessive self-differentiation managed to open up the cultural conversation in ways we are still reeling from and, arguably, trying to shut down. Academic journals, in my experience, seemed far too complicit with the latter, mirroring the march to discursive standardization and ideological conformism that has ironically come about in the wake of and sometimes as the result of the liberatory gestures aligned with race, gender, and sexuality, and certainly in the wake of theory, since it too has become in some contexts a mode of policing. Journals may have been products of and deeply committed to those latter gestures and concerns, and still beholden to the injunction to theorize, yet there was nothing more dispiriting than

discovering the forces of resistance had broken down Babylon's gate only to replace it with a million portholes.

For example, instead of fomenting a broad climate of intellectual diversity fed by quite different aesthetic proclivities and political priorities, many academic journals tended to mirror what we now know has been a radical fragmenting and microspecializing of knowledge afoot in a climate I am finally comfortable agreeing is “neoliberal” (shivering now with my struggle with what has become an unbearably imprecise cliché). I had thought the goal was to usher colleagues into a broad conversation, with positions to be determined in the wake of that primary engagement, which ultimately transforms the field of play—for readers who know their modernism, that is essentially T. S. Eliot's “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919), published first in the feminist-founded London journal the *Egoist*, with its mandate to “recognise no taboos.” By the time I began submitting work to the necessary journals, it was clear that one's a priori relationship to those positions was the primary source of evaluation. And as reading journals became essential to my progress as a *black* scholar, it was not difficult to witness the anarchic realm of cultural and intellectual possibilities that had inspired me whittled into something as correspondingly small as that professional world to which I sought entrance.

That is the bitter backstory, the history that conditions my thinking about the role, value, and place of journals in the current intellectual and academic climate. In thinking it through, I will take advantage of the distinctions generally made in the world of publishing between the artistic/literary and the academic or the public/informational and the specialized. Too many journals feature such distinctions, and, despite the fetish for interdisciplinarity, they ultimately manifest in limiting intellectual options, professional choices, and one's sense of community—interpretive, political, or otherwise. Whether as a manifestation or a reaction, they function now as a clear product of the hyperspecialization of knowledge that has come with the institutionalization of those gestures and fields of inquiry central to my work and perspective.

What has always inspired me are journals that blend literary, public, and academic work in deliberate attempts to legitimate multiple spheres of intellectual production and as a safeguard against groupthink and cultural isolation. This latter, of course, is necessary for the healthy functioning of cultural or political movements, particularly those disempowered by formal media and mainstream academe. It is partly why I took on the editorship of *The Black Scholar* (TBS) after discovering myself in the unlikely position of being its best option for reinvention.¹ This journal had emerged from a very public confluence of black political and cultural movements—black power militancy, black arts, Pan-Africanism and decolonization, black feminism, and the emergence of a black political class and cultural elite. As primary intellectual organ to that confluence, it had to be nonexclusive, broad based, and intentionally rooted in the stridency of demand and the humility of exchange. Its original mandate was, as

1 See www.theblackscholar.org/about-us.

the founders often said, “to unite the academy and the street,” after all. I dare anyone to try saying that now without embarrassment or self-consciousness.

As is often common with professionalization, literary journals began to fade out of my realm of interest, along with novels, plays, poetry, and so-called fun reading; and as “cultural” and “American” studies began to claim a much broader remit (including the deconstruction of “fun” itself), academic journals became a necessary evil—snapshots of a world of intellectual engagement and rhetorical play that seemed as inaccessible as any celebrity magazine or insider’s blog. So it was and is with some consternation and social chaos (don’t ask) that I found myself editor in chief of *The Black Scholar*. Owing in part to my obstinate commitment to the very idea of its longevity and an obligation to its legacy, I found myself in charge of a journal that was, to be frank, so moribund that I, like many, thought it already consigned to the romance of late 1960s/1970s-era black radicalism.

Though *TBS* continued through the 1980s, its influence had ceded to mere ubiquity: it was not a place that anyone I knew still read or to which they even thought to submit. My first charge, then, was to make sure the journal did not die. My second was to alert scholars, particularly of my generation and younger, that it had not died and could be a viable option for their efforts and, in time, a preferable one. The latter required the first order of business to be a shift to peer review, no mean feat since the lack of peer review was central to the journal’s revolutionary ethos and its ability to foment the kind of intellectual and artistic diversity that I have complained is sadly missing from too many journals. That the number and culture of black scholars have grown since the journal was founded, and that these scholars still need venues specifically geared toward their work, made this compromise necessary, since our goal was and is to also enable professional advancement; it was, however, not a painless compromise, since it generated the earliest criticism, from the most intimate zones (those critics of peer review had not caught up with the fact that the discursive hegemony they once struggled against had already been transformed, in part because of their efforts). Another shift that generated less external criticism but equal amounts of soul searching was the move from being an autonomous business that managed its own production, marketing, and distribution—which *TBS* was for more than forty years—to a journal with the benefits and complexities of working with a large publisher (Routledge).

And finally, my third charge was to adapt the journal to that very intellectual and academic climate I have spent the first part of this essay complaining about. Thinking in the abstract about what journals now meant, what they could do and should do, or why they were needed was not part of the deal or a luxury I could afford. But it has become a necessary and rewarding part of keeping *The Black Scholar* alive and moving it steadily toward what now looks like an early flourishing. Having assembled a team as diverse as our interests, we on the editorial staff quickly improved our standards of professionalization. We did this, first, by reconnecting with the elders and promising them a respectful space for their commitments; then, by an

emphasis on work by younger scholars, writers, and critics who represent fields and spaces of conversation that were not being fully represented or not being regularly engaged; and, finally, by reemphasizing the journal's global reach. Having established the diversity of cultural interest and intellectual background that marked *The Black Scholar* in its "uniting the academy and the street" days, we are now blessed with the opportunity to reflect on and imagine what the journal/a journal can offer in these times.

We are also in a position to, one, adduce and argue for the current necessity for high-level cultural conversation and analysis and, two, evaluate the volume of critical work being produced that is eager for specialized venues. The need for the former has come about because of the intense growth of knowledge and the ubiquity of information resulting from at least two consecutive information/media revolutions, which is why there is so much of the latter. There really is no shortage of work out there, of all sorts, good and bad. As to the specifics of our journal, alongside those revolutions there has been the institutionalization of "race" in the humanities, as both topic and critical approach, as well as a proliferation of public conversations about racism in ways our founders helped make possible but could never have predicted. However, there continues to be a mismatch between the amount of spaces for such conversation and analysis and the sheer number of ideas, scholars, artists, and opinions available. The amount of available material grows along with each individual's accessibility to media (blogs, Internet magazines, self-publishing). Considering this exponential growth of critical and literary output, it is not elitist to also note the dramatic diminishment of quality or authority in the work available (or if it is, then this point is no less true).

As has been noted for some time, while new media outlets, techniques, and technologies may have democratized information and rendered knowledge accessible in ever more immediate ways, they have also diminished the value of professional, or at least skilled, intellectual labor. Research seems imperiled, as does the archive, precisely at the moment when we have greatest access to it; and the democratizing of opinion has led to a healthy suspicion of expert opinion but also to a dangerous rejection of expertise. This is precisely why journals matter and why it became harder and harder for this editor to avoid greater responsibilities and ambitions than simply keeping *TBS* alive. We are awash in undifferentiated information and unvetted opinion, and public conversation has suffered, as has that ideal of maintaining a pipeline between "the academy and the street"—the latter read more as a virtual space of intellectual and political engagement than the mythical zone of urban authenticity and nonhierarchical interclass contact dreamt of by our journal's founders. Contemporary racial conversation or reflection evinces similar diminishment as it has become impossible for many to distinguish between empowerment and ubiquity, discourse and noise.

On that latter front, it is important to note that the aforementioned opening up of "race" to/ in the broader humanities has come with costs, particularly to a journal like ours. As race and racism, racial formations, and related interests and methodologies have become both foundational and de rigueur inside and outside of academe, the kinds of materials we specialize

in are now welcome in many places. Or if not welcome, there is a sense that they must be at least considered or somehow represented. Contemporary black scholars, for example, may feel they have greater options than before, and many are more likely to submit their work to mainstream or disciplinary journals—especially those who have emerged on the margins of multiple disciplines—than to a specifically “black” one (that we were known for operating without peer review was for many an understandable professional problem). This opening up of venues for scholarship on and by blacks is something that on a good day our founders would have claimed as victory but in inclement weather probably would have attacked as cooptation. Given that the latter is arguably a sign of victory or a response to it, one must side with the former while always keeping an eye out for the latter.

But these costs have also been produced by the emergence of “black scholars” as an institutional presence since the founding of the journal. This presence is notable despite the still great paucity of blacks in academia but has been attended by journals, blogs, web magazines, and various venues catering to specific or professional interests as well as to distinct global black communities. Black scholars have increasingly made themselves viable sources of knowledge alongside blacks in media and a now established (entrenched) black political class. But now scholars, critics, and activists of all ethnic and social backgrounds operate under the banner of antiracism or race-based social justice. A great many people of *all* backgrounds are deeply engaged in research, writing, and organizing around race and ethnicity, racism, and cultural politics, and background as a consideration of one’s work has become suspect and in some cases illegal.

Black scholars who are focused on these issues, however, find their work competing with a broader racial conversation or with institutions that are now legally prohibited from privileging their specificity. Again, a sign of victory, yet one that for some time diminished the centrality of specifically “black” perspectives, venues, and fora and also, some will argue, shifted the terms of discussion and debate in problematic ways. For example, a shift in conversation has often been toward white liberal or institutional curatorship and sometimes away from black empowerment, which is why it is not uncommon for specifically black opinions to be silenced by “racial” perspectives that need not be at all focused on the social or material interests of black communities and movements.

These tensions and shifts may not have started in journals, magazines, and media but certainly can be charted through them. After all, this emergence of the black scholar as a legitimate cultural and institutional presence did not correspond with the rise of a distinct black press and media. If anything, it was an inverse relationship. This decenteredness, however, has begun to work in our favor, in a climate also characterized by hasty proclamations of the “death of print.” These proclamations will soon sound as dated and absurd as “the death of vinyl” or the “post” of *racial*. As a discursive space that takes a *specific* interest in fomenting black interests, movements, issues, and scholarship, not only from cover to cover but on a regular basis, we have found it easier than expected to not die.

We have found that those who crave specificity, as well as refugees from those hasty “deaths” and “posts,” are numerous enough to generate conversation, interest, and, indeed, *growth*. This insight has been borne out by our work with the journal but was gleaned from a study of the proliferation of literary and cultural journals over the last ten years or so of this phase of the information revolution. The *Believer*, *n+1*, the *Atlantic*, and many others continue to make an impact because of the genuine need for, say, investigative or long-form journalism, narrative poetry, and interviews; one is tempted to think that the “death of modernism,” in this regard, was also too hastily proclaimed. Modernism’s journal explosion, after all, was in league with and response to the presence of new media forms, such as photography, film, and sound recording in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These more recent journals are surviving also because of their understanding of the nature of the current information revolution, which like all technological revolutions produces a curious duality: a fetish for novelty alongside an obsession with nostalgia. It is that duality, for example, that has generated the flourishing of vinyl records here at the height of digitization, or an interest in tactile, material artifacts—print, for instance—precisely at the moment when knowledge itself seems the most ephemeral.

So, ultimately, this is why journals matter more now than ever: as an analog, *healthily nostalgic* space of specialized conversation, vetted not only by editors and peer reviewers but by the very narrowing of concern necessary for focus and exchange in the midst of media saturation and the ironic need it produces for research, guided opinion, and focused debate. It is important to note a difference here between specialized conversation—as in thematically focused and rooted in research or material experience—and the extreme specialization that is characteristic of today’s academic disciplines and subfields. Though contemporary academics are often accused of this narrowness, truth be told, this is even more endemic to our media landscape where knowledge is so individualized that it is rare that one encounters true difference and so loses the ability to engage it.

Though highly discipline-focused work is unavoidable and at times necessary, we strive to limit and transform it because our nostalgic desire for specialized conversation comes also with a desire to be introduced to the varieties of possibilities, approaches, and perspectives within that conversation. The very technicalities of a journal make it the ideal form for this. Its regularity and rhythm of appearance allow for the organic creation of community and conversation, for advance and retreat and enough time in between to reengage. If Internet-based response tends to immediacy and emotion and depends much less on deep reflection and research, and if books are necessarily slow to produce, are ruminative, and have less purchase on the contemporary moment and its flashpoints, a journal is well situated as a midpoint.

The Black Scholar is a print journal; it would, however, have been suicide to not immediately focus on the Internet and new media in order to reinvent it. Our founders were from an earlier time and greeted new technology with suspicion. New media has changed our sense

of time and how conversation, knowledge, and power flow; venues for exchange and resistance have clearly had to adapt. One finds it hard to imagine a journal or newspaper surviving without some primary parallel or secondary supportive online presence. We have begun studying other literary and scholarly journals that are weathering the e-storm, as it were, as well as newspapers and magazines that have decided to become a hub of information rather than the sole outlet (and in this we have found *Small Axe* to be as helpful as the *New York Times*). In the way *The Black Scholar* has always assumed a journal to be a public space, we now imagine it as a node in a sphere of informational activity and intellectual production. We have been constructing an online and social media infrastructure in order to, as quickly as possible, transform the journal into something self-reliant. The goal is to blend the reflective, research-based engagement of a journal with the immediacy of blogs, websites, and social media. We now imagine *TBS Online* growing its own identity, intimately connected to the print journal but catering to op-ed, archival features, short-form interviews and articles, profiles, and, in the near future, ground-zero reportage and discussion forums.

Enabling these aspirations are the sheer number of active and activist voices out there demanding our continued existence. We may be far from able to fully implement the kinds of changes we have embarked on, but judging from the public response to *The Black Scholar's* rebirth, journals seem to matter. In addition to vetting those many voices and encouraging their research, one of the most essential and arduous tasks seems to be to educate them by leading them outside of the ideological and disciplinary boxes that they largely operate within. These voices are products, after all, of that aforementioned climate of fragmentation and hyperspecialization, even those who are not scholars. Much of the actual editing focuses on this. It's one thing to promise or dream of interdisciplinary and politically diverse conversation but quite another to actually have such a conversation when one's entire professional life is constrained by specific modes of rhetoric. This is especially the case—oddly enough—when it comes to race and politics: the assumption that one's political views automatically obviate the need for editing and strong conceptual challenges is hard for too many to shake (as is the assumption of there being an easy correspondence between racial radicalism and communal legibility).

I have said much here about the information revolution because as editor of an “analog” venue one cannot ignore one's role in relationship to it. With technology's opening up a virtual space of social media and the Internet, what has also opened up is a sense of entitlement to that space from ever-increasing and voluble publics. That, it seems to me, is where journals and editors figure most: in evaluating the worth of that entitlement, historicizing it, and then transforming its products. The goal is to now render those products useful, catalytic, and much less narcissistic than they currently seem.