

## Reflections on "Research"

Dr. Stephanie Y. Evans  
McNair Scholars Program - Summer 2007

It seems to me that "research" is a combination of art, science, and policy. The researcher's cultural identity, values, and ethics are implicated in each step of inquiry, from forming the question and defining terms to selecting data and interpreting results. Given this observation, my personal definition of research is based on insights from the following sources: James Baldwin, Zora Neale Hurston, and historic Black women educators like Anna Julia Cooper, Mary McLeod Bethune, and Willa Player.

### Research as Art - James Baldwin

In "The Creative Process" (originally published in 1962), Baldwin wrote:

Perhaps the primary distinction of the artist is that he must actively cultivate the state which most men, necessarily, must avoid: being alone....the conquest of the physical world is not man's only duty. He is also enjoined to conquer the great wilderness of himself. The precise role of the artist, then, is to illuminate that darkness...so that we will not, in all our doing lose sight of its purpose, which is, after all, to make the world a more human dwelling place. ... The artist cannot and must not take anything for granted, but must drive to the heart of every answer and expose the question the answer hides. ... I am really trying to make clear the nature of the artist's responsibility to his society. ... It is for this reason that all societies have battled with the incorrigible disturber of the peace--the artist. We become social creatures because we cannot live any other way. ...And we cannot learn this unless we are willing to tell the truth about ourselves, and the truth about us is always at variance with what we wish to be. The human effort is to bring these two realities into a relationship resembling reconciliation. ... The dangers of being an American artist are not greater than those of being an artist anywhere else in the world, but they are very particular. These dangers are produced by our history. ... whoever cannot tell himself the truth about his past is trapped in it.... Societies never know it, but the war of an artist with his society is a lover's war, and he does, at his best, what lovers do, which is to reveal the beloved to himself and, with that revelation, to make freedom real.<sup>1</sup>

I see three main similarities in how Baldwin describes the artist and how I imagine the doctoral and professional researcher. Truly original thought requires solitude. Though the best research is collaborative, a productive collaboration will require that each partner bring unique perspectives to the work. This original intellectual production is hard...much like the tortured poet or painter attempting to make a new statement.

Secondly, researchers who are producing work that unsettles the status quo (particularly those that challenge White or male supremacy) are often persecuted, as are artists. I think of Galileo's monumental fight against the Catholic Church. I think of the innumerable

---

<sup>1</sup> James Baldwin. "The Creative Process." (1962). Reprinted in James Baldwin, *The Price of the Ticket, Collected Nonfiction, 1948-1985*. New York: St. Martin's, 1985.

metaphysical, mathematical, and medical solutions that were lost when Alexander "the Great" and his European successors burned, destroyed, and dismissed the valuable research of Egypt, Timbuktu, and many other African nations. I think of the retaliation women receive when producing scholarship that challenges the "conventional" wisdom of male thinkers. And yet, we must write; as artists must create--alone in many ways, often speaking truth to power.

A final comparison of art and scholarship lies in the potential of scholarship to help free its society from excessive prejudice, discrimination, and malice. I believe that the academy cannot produce social solutions any more than political leaders can--only the general public can create a just society. Certainly, much of the best writing happens *outside* of formal educational institutions. However, the academy is a critical site which offers space and time to engage ideas useful to the general public. Research, when contextualized by an honest assessment of social, political, and national pasts, has the ability to advance the cause of universal human freedom and much-needed social justice. However, without a critical look at historical antecedents that have produced today's problems, researchers will be powerless to come up with answers that provide a viable or sustainable future.

The creative process of research--as art--represents infinite possibilities. Research, as art, can be as beautiful, sensual, grotesque, and moving as human beings ourselves.

### **Research as Science - Zora Neale Hurston**

In my book *Black Women in the Ivory Tower*, I consider Hurston as a scholar. A graduate of Barnard College and a graduate student at Columbia University, she is often only regarded as a novelist. I write:

Anthropologist Gwendolyn Mikell rightly observed that because Hurston did not finish her [doctoral] degree, she is generally recognized for her literary production instead of for her formal research. This trend ignores her scholarly processes. "Research," Hurston explained in *Dust Tracks*, "is formalized curiosity." While collecting stories, she was conscious of her approach, recorded discrepancies with expected results, and formulated unique methodological strategies; she was well read, well trained, and focused; yet her writing was regarded as more hapless than scholarly. Regardless of how she revered [her advisor Franz] Boas for his objectivity, her methodology for communicating with locals was what later scholars would call "subjective ethnography" and "reflexive" study. According to Hurston, the more a researcher related to the content of the study, the more accurate and rich the analysis. Conventional practice—scientific objectivity—ran counter to this approach. After gathering data in Florida, Haiti, and Jamaica, Hurston's excellent artistic product (most notably *Their Eyes*) proved the value of her scholarly process.<sup>2</sup>

Hurston's practice of research allows us to understand that a subjective approach to data collection and interpretation can, in fact, be organized, valid, and formal. Ultimately, there must be a balance of subjective and objective aspects of qualitative and quantitative approaches. Formal inquiry requires rigor; it does not, however, require rejection of any association to the object under review.

---

<sup>2</sup> Stephanie Y. Evans. *Black Women in the Ivory Tower, 1850-1954: An Intellectual History*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1007, 87.

As the authors of *Practical Research: Planning and Design* note, "the scientific method" involves identifying a problem, positing a hypothesis that may resolve the problem, gathering data, then analyzing and interpreting the data to see if they support the hypothesis in solving the problem.<sup>3</sup> Scientific processes involves the following:

- Consistency and discipline
- Survey of relevant literature and prior research
- Methods that can be replicated and repeated
- Relational measurement
- Evaluative measurement
- Position or argument that others can verify

Some of these aspects are present in art, but science, unlike art, requires validity and reliability. Art too requires a certain type of validity--the audience must validate the art--but, for some artists, that part is optional. In contrast, science demands verification: in natural, physical, and social sciences, formalized process is integral. Though science is kin to art in the end of social applicability, it is measurably different in its means: artists must originate ideas internally, scientists must originate ideas relative to other scientists. Good researchers will find the balance and use the creative forces of both art and science in their work.

### **Research as Policy - Historic Black Women Educators**

In my publications, I argue that, "Anna Cooper, Mary Bethune, and their contemporaries articulated educational philosophies that had four central themes: demand for applied learning; recognition of the importance of social standpoint and cultural identity in scholarship; a critical epistemology that both supported and resisted mainstream American ideals; and moral existentialism grounded in a sense of communal responsibility." Because of Black women's subjugated position (based on the intersection of race and gender which limited their economic class), their ideas were more likely to be dedicated to alleviating social disparities. There was a tension between the elitism inherent in academic endeavors and the democratic current driven by their community identity, yet, historic Black women researchers provide a model for connecting scholarly research to social justice.

Though contemporary researchers must ultimately decide on their own disciplinary, philosophical, theoretical, and methodological approaches, it is essential that each scholar understand the political implications of research. No matter how remote the lab or abstract the idea, researcher's production will impact social mores, practices, or policy. Scholars must recognize the potentially damaging application their work might have and formulate their ideas with politics in mind. Either your work will be used to further social disparities or to alleviate them...as Howard Zinn has said, "you can't be neutral on a moving train." There is no such thing as apolitical research.<sup>4</sup>

I use Dr. Willa Player's 1939 scholarly "challenge" as one guide for envisioning the potential application of my work. After stating that academic institutions and scientific research are dangerously close to world destruction, she wrote:

---

<sup>3</sup> Paul D. Leedy and Jeanne Ellis Ormrod. *Practical Research: Planning and Design*, 8<sup>th</sup> edition. New Jersey: Pearson, 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Evans, *Black Women in the Ivory Tower*, 8.

We desperately need a leadership of inclusiveness. May I say that this is possible in proportion as we are able to put our love of humanity above the love of self. Responsible leadership must be characterized by love. . . . We need desperately a leadership of intellectual integrity. We have to say this over and over again—for we are prone to want the world at too cheap a price, and nothing really worthy is ever achieved except by hard, intellectual effort, and the development of the power of straight thinking.<sup>5</sup>

If researchers do not love humanity more than themselves, their findings will be deadly.

\*\*\*

**For me, research** is an individual creative process, a formal approach to asking and answering questions, and a means to improve the quality of social and civic life. Academic and intellectual work provides scholars an opportunity to connect the innermost mind with all that exists in the past, present, and future.

I believe a scholar's existence--reading, thinking, writing, *and* acting to apply ideas toward improving the quality of life--is a merciful consolation for the significant limitations of our human condition.

---

<sup>5</sup> Evans, *Black Women in the Ivory Tower*, 209.