

Black Information Futures Symposium: An Autoethnographic Field Series (Part III)

Part III: Entering the Room

Arrival

Seattle greeted me with rain.

The air was crisp and fresh, and a few students moved quietly across the University of Washington campus as I made my way toward the Husky Union Building. Two rooms inside the building had been dedicated to symposium attendees. I, of course, went to the wrong door first. A kind student noticed my confusion and let me in.

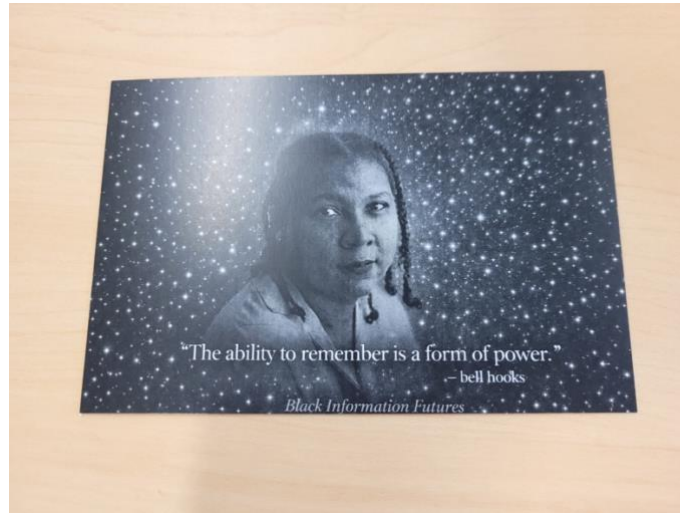
The First Encounters

The first person I saw was [Tracie D. Hall](#) .

She was busy making final preparations, but paused long enough to hug me good and say, "We needed you here. I'm so happy you made it." And y'all, that was everything to hear and feel in that moment.



Inside, the room was already alive with energy, preparation, excitement, and introductions. After checking in and receiving my symposium badge, I noticed the details waiting for us on the tables. Printed copies of the agenda. A Black Information Futures Symposium tote bag. A bell hooks post card.



The gratitude I felt in those early moments stayed with me.

The first person I spoke with in the room was [Ira Revels](#). We bonded instantly over grant writing and storytelling. Ira shared a glimpse of a new product they have been building called [My Grant Copilot](#) and are looking for beta testers. The conversation felt easy and familiar, the kind that happens when two people recognize the labor behind each other's work.

The Room and the Body

The larger room was set up classroom style with long tables and rows of chairs. In the back sat a snack table.

Thank goodness for that table.

I had not eaten anything before arriving. I had been working on my presentation that morning, and the symposium opened at 2pm on Saturday afternoon. In the moment the creativity was feeding me, but once I arrived some fruit, hummus, chips, and a sparkling water saved the day. Truly.

The smaller room was arranged like a board room, a space where ideas moved across the table instead of arriving from a podium. There is something sacred about people gathering shoulder to shoulder to learn. Rooms like this have long held the quiet work

of Black intellectual life, where study, questioning, and imagination stretch beyond the limits placed before us.

Opening and Orientation

As I began introducing myself to others, I noticed a pattern among the participants. Many were librarians or former librarians. Many were scholars whose books and publications have shaped conversations in libraries, archives, and universities. Others were archivists or artists whose collections live inside some of the most respected institutions and museums in the country.

And there was a strong presence from the Chicago area.

Some names were familiar, like MacArthur Genius and Creative Executive Officer [Tonika Johnson](#). Others appeared through the invisible dotted lines that connect our work across institutions and cities. One of those lines was [Steven M. Adams](#) from Northwestern University, chair of the Board of the [Black Metropolis Research Consortium](#), where I will present a paper talk during their twentieth anniversary symposium on Black Chicago this June.

The symposium unfolded across three days, beginning mid day Saturday and ending early evening Monday. Saturday afternoon through Sunday afternoon was reserved for presenters and invited guests. Sunday afternoon and all of Monday opened the doors to the public.

I appreciated the intentionality behind that structure immediately. The *presenters'-in-service* portion made the gathering feel intimate even though there were so many of us there. Each day also took place in a different location across the University of Washington campus, which offered a change of scenery and the chance to move through the environment together.

When we took our seats, Tracie welcomed us and introduced the curatorial team who helped bring the symposium to life. Each day she made it a priority to acknowledge and thank them, reminding us that this gathering was the result of collective labor. The symposium ran so smoothly that it was clear this moment had been carefully planned together.



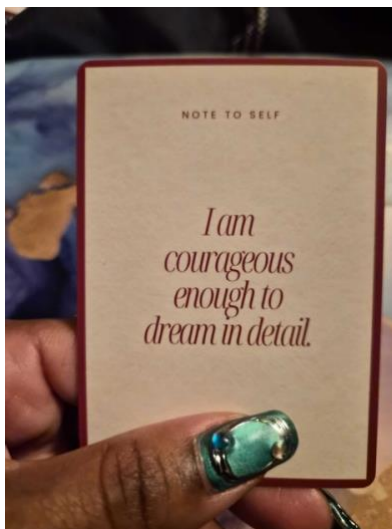
SPECIAL THANKS TO THE BLACK INFORMATION FUTURES SYMPOSIUM CURATORIAL TEAM:

TRACIE D. HALL (CONVENER), KIMBERLY CRUTCHER, MAKIBA FOSTER, STEVEN FULLWOOD, CHRISTA HARDY, SARAH HARRIS, JADA JONES, TEMI ODUMOSU, ERICA OWAN, AND ANGELA D. R. SMITH.

WITH INCREDIBLE SUPPORT FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON INFORMATION SCHOOL:

BRANDON LOCKE (CALMA), SHARON STREAMS (CALMA), VIKKI NELSON, AND DEAN ANIND DEY.

Each day also began with a small ritual. A member of the curatorial team would pull from a deck of cards and share a guiding word. [Denise Wilmer Barreto](#), who sat next to me during the opening session, and I giggled like schoolgirls with excitement because we both love card decks and use them in facilitation, writing prompts, and daily affirmation practices. A random pull on Day 1 from the deck I was carrying with me on the trip felt like confirmation of what I had experienced the night before. That story lives in Part II.



28 Affirmations for Women Who Serve, Build, & Move The World

As introductions began around the room, I felt something shift.

I sat like a child in a library. Only instead of being surrounded by books, I was surrounded by vessels of knowledge in human form.

And the first afternoon of ideas had only just begun.

The First Afternoon of Ideas

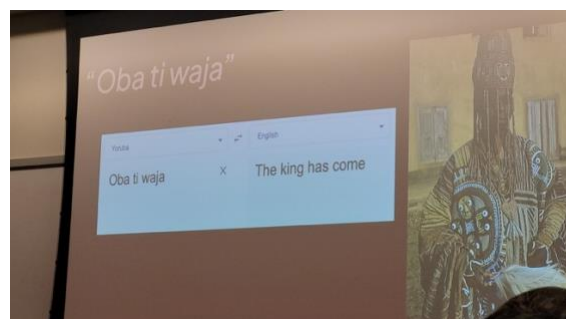
The first afternoon alone included multiple concurrent sessions across two rooms, bringing together scholars, archivists, artists, technologists, and cultural workers. Some sessions ran simultaneously, which meant no one person could experience everything happening in the building at once. Conversations unfolded in parallel across rooms, intersecting across disciplines and approaches.

What I share here reflects only a few of the threads I was able to follow that afternoon.

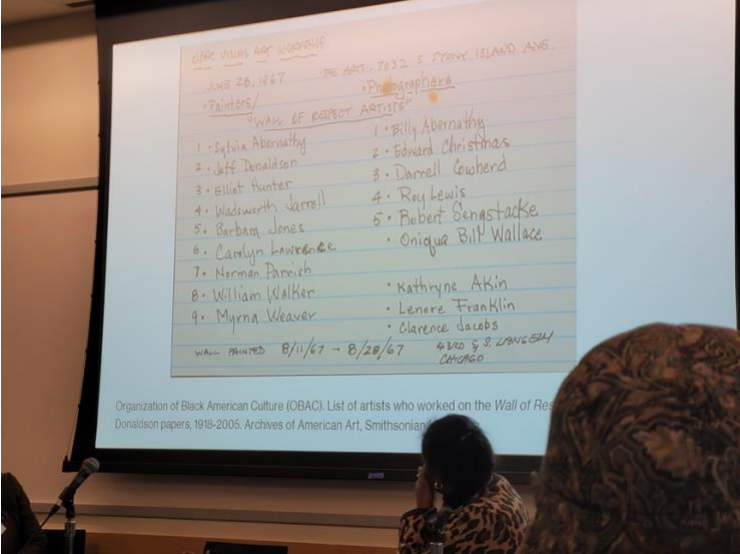
One of the concurrent sessions centered on counter-narratives, meaning-making, and Black public histories. Within that conversation, **Imani Harmon** presented work on *Critical Fabulations of Fugitive Ancestors with Astrology*. Listening to her speak, I was reminded that Black archives do not always live inside institutional repositories. Sometimes they reside in cosmologies, spiritual systems, and interpretive practices passed down across generations.



Seyi Olojo presented *Towards an African Epistemology of Language Data*, drawing attention to how online translation systems often misinterpret language, particularly across the many dialects that exist throughout the African diaspora. This work highlighted how digital systems struggle to account for linguistic nuance, reminding us that language itself carries cultural memory that cannot be easily flattened into standardized data models.



In that same session, [Janice Bond](#) presented *Walls That Remember: Black Public Art as Living Information Systems in Chicago*. Her work traced the ways murals and neighborhood public art operate as repositories of community memory. The walls themselves become information infrastructures, carrying stories, histories, and political expression across time.



List of artists who worked on the Wall of Respect

That thread continued through the presentation by **Sierra Parsons** and **Ricky Reyes**, who discussed *Black Memory in Motion: Training Black Oral Historians Through the Seattle Black Spatial Histories Institute*. Their work trains community members to document and interpret the histories embedded in Black spatial life across Seattle, positioning oral history as both research method and community infrastructure.

Why Oral History and Why Now?



The Seattle Black Spatial Histories Institute is one way, among many, that Wa Na Wari seeks to build collective power towards a future of Black ownership and belonging by rooting our work in a legacy of Black resilience, creativity and self-determination. Training community members in the techniques and best practices of Black memory work is an important step towards shifting power around whose stories are told, how they're told, and what place those stories hold in the shaping of Black futures.

Digital Blackness and Virtual Embodiment

Prof. A.M. Darke presented *Black Virtuality: Representation, Embodiment, and the Politics of Digital Blackness*, examining how digital environments shape the ways Black identity is represented and experienced. The work invited us to interrogate the structures embedded in virtual spaces and consider how design choices influence whose bodies, stories, and possibilities are made visible.

The conversation moved from theory into demonstration with **Erik Ponder**, who introduced *Black to the Future: Exploring African American Cultural Heritage Sites Using Immersive Visualization Technology*. The project uses immersive visualization tools to allow audiences to encounter cultural heritage sites such as the Lorraine Motel, extending access to places that carry the weight of Black history and collective memory.

Across sessions, the themes began to accumulate.

Art as archive. Cosmology as knowledge system. Herbal practice as data. Oral testimony as infrastructure. Digital environments as new sites of Black cultural memory.

I sat there taking it all in.

I truly was not ready. My mind was not prepared for the range of intellectual work unfolding in that room.

Sessions continued until nearly 7pm that evening, which felt closer to 9pm back home in Chicago. Normally I am in bed by 8:30.

But I was energized.

Holding the Knowledge

When the sessions ended that evening, we were encouraged to gather informally for dinner and continue the conversations that had started throughout the afternoon.

Many people did exactly that. But I made a different choice.

Quiet time is not something I get much of in my life these days. Between caregiving, work, travel, and the responsibilities I carry, silence is rare. So instead of heading out for dinner, I returned to my hotel room.

I sat with the program book and read it the way I used to read the bulletins at church. Slowly. Carefully. Like something important might be hidden there. A kind of foreshadowing.

I wanted to capture what I had experienced before it slipped away. The ideas shared that afternoon were too important to trust to memory alone. Speaker by speaker, session by session, I wrote down fragments of insight, questions that had surfaced, and connections already forming between presentations.

It was a way of slowing the moment down. Of honoring the labor of the people who had traveled across the country to share their work. Of making sure that what happened in that room did not simply pass through me, but stayed with me.

By the time I closed the program booklet that night, I felt both full and curious.

Full from the intellectual generosity of the room. Curious about what the next day would bring.

Part IV enters Day 2 of the symposium, where the conversations deepened and the terrain of Black Information Futures became even more expansive.

Kyla Williams Tate Policy Strategist at the Intersections of AI, Art, and Digital Equity
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