Bibliographical Problems in Negro Research

DISCUSSION

MR. LELAND: The suggestion Mr. Reddick made with respect to microphotography is especially interesting in view of the fact that the Council will soon call a conference to begin the consideration of definite plans for microphotography. I should therefore be glad if this Conference included some reference to its possibilities among its recommendations, because it will be desirable to take into account special needs such as those Mr. Reddick has indicated.

It also occurs to me that such a step may, for the time being, help in a practical manner to solve some of the difficulties Mr. Reddick has indicated with regard to access to materials. Through the use of present-day microfilm equipment it would be quite possible to build up important libraries, or collections, in Negro universities and Negro schools.

MR. APTHEKER: Would it not be of great aid if the documents located in county seats could be brought together into state archives or other central repositories? One frequently has to spend much time merely getting out to some county court-house.

MR. WISH: I think that problem is almost insoluble. There is felt to be a certain commercial value in maintaining documents in local areas, and I hesitate to say what the Virginia Historical Society would say about the removal of some of their local collections. Indeed, some of the coolness manifested toward microfilms has been caused by the belief that this copying would nullify the value of local records.

MR. HERSKOVITS: The problem of preserving other collections of original data is also important. Ten years ago, for example, I briefly visited the island of Antigua, where I learned of a very large collection of original documents appertaining to the plantation system and the history of slavery. Last summer, when the vessel I was on called at Antigua, I discovered that the "place of safety" I had been assured housed this collection was a very damp stone building, where many of these documents were being eaten by worms or were just disintegrating. I found huge piles of folio volumes scattered over the floor, and only the most important and best preserved housed in the poor accommodations the private
offices of the Chief Justice offered. I hope that the entire collection may soon be microfilmed and thus made available to scholars in the British Museum Library, in the Library of Congress, in the New York Public Library, and perhaps in one or two other centers.

Certainly, with regard to the vast amounts of materials on the whole history of slaving that are found in European ports, such preservation is imperative. I know, for example, that the Fabre family in Marseilles, who own the Fabre Line and operate the Compagnie Fabre in West Africa, have extensive documents in the family files, and I suspect that in Scandinavia and Holland there are many documents.

Mr. Bunche: What sort of materials would there be in Scandinavia?

Mr. Herskovits: The Scandinavians were full participants in the slave trade in the early days, and of course for materials concerning the history of the Danish West Indies—the Virgin Islands, that is—you must go to Copenhagen.

Mr. Johnson: I should like to ask Mr. Reddick if there is a full catalog of the documents in the Schomburg Collection.

Mr. Reddick: A catalog is in preparation sponsored by the Historical Records Survey.

Mr. Johnson: It seems to me a first step would be the consolidation of the document lists of the major collections dealing with the Negro. Hasn’t the Library of Congress spent a great deal of money recently getting some Latin American documents reproduced?

Mr. Pattee: Do you mean the material from the archives of the Indies? That has been going on for a great many years.

Mr. Leland: No, these relate specifically to Latin America. The project in the Library of Congress was to secure copies of all the documents in European archives relating to the history of the United States. Originally that was based largely on an exploration made by the Carnegie Institution; then it was intensified when the gift of Mr. Rockefeller made a large-scale project possible. The Library of Congress has brought together copies of some millions of pages of material from a great number of archives, especially in Great Britain and Spain. In Spain the production
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has been very large indeed. It relates to the Spanish United States, not to the West Indies, although the source of the archives was the archives of the island of Cuba, to which the archives of St. Augustine and of Florida and of other cities now in the United States were transferred. They were then transferred from Cuba to Seville, so there is a vast amount of material that is not very much exploited.

When I was working in France in the French archives, preparing the guide (which has not as yet been published) on materials for American history in the French archives, I became interested in the French West Indies. Since copying was then beginning for the Library of Congress, I suggested copying the whole series of correspondence on French Santo Domingo, the present Haiti. Acting on that suggestion, they did copy the entire series of letters written by French officials in Santo Domingo to the home government. Those are all in the Library of Congress, and they comprise a large series, a matter of about 100 manuscript volumes; there are also some for Martinique and some from other series.

For South America, a good deal of copying from the Spanish archives has been done, and the copies are in some depositories in South America. But there again it is a matter primarily of interest for colonial history. The greatest collection of this kind is in the Argentine, I think.

Mr. Herskovits: There is still another type of material that is important because it throws light on the African background of New World Negroes. In working up the sources on one of the West African folk among whom I studied, the Dahomeans, I found that the corroborative evidence concerning the customs of pre-European culture available in the writings of the men who had been there in the capacity of traders or diplomatic representatives—Richard Burton, for example, who was sent by Queen Victoria to Dahomey with the idea of suppressing the slave trade—was of the utmost significance. Captains of early slaving-times, sometimes men of considerable literary ability, give us in their writings no little information about the cultures from which the African ancestors of the modern New World Negro population came.

Mr. Leland: In such a collection as that of the French Colonial
archives, a very long series of correspondence from the French colonies in Africa is to be found. Much of our knowledge about the American Indies is contained in such archives, while an enormous amount of information on Africa is contained in the correspondence from officials in French African colonies.

Mr. Watkins: Are there any materials written by the Arabs that are pertinent?

Mr. Herskovits: This question takes us a little afield, perhaps, but I may mention the so-called Bilali diary from St. Simon’s Island, Georgia, which has at last been translated by Mr. Joseph Greenberg. We know now that it isn’t a diary at all, but a series of passages from certain Arabic legal treatises. The originals were shown to Hausa malams, or learned men in West Africa, who were able to assist the translation of this material which was written by a Negro slave in this country. Arabic materials are highly pertinent, certainly for Brazil, where a Moslem group still exists.

Mr. Bascom: Mr. Greenberg has been going through also some of the early Arabic documents from the region where he worked. He secured the loan of a copy of the so-called Kano Chronicle, a written history of the city.

Mr. Herskovits: We have been able to obtain microfilm copies of that, and a duplicate of the original, which we have at Northwestern, can be made at any time.