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The Walter White Project

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The Walter White project began with a few vague notions about creating a website that served as a resource on the late civil rights leader, who led the NAACP for seventeen years. As a figure in the Civil Rights Movement his role is pivotal. In addition his life and work makes him a sort of an intersection connecting the lives of people from the humblest African Americans to those in the highest seats of power. The range of his activities is so diverse and complex that it was challenging to envision how we could, in a non-linear way, best display divergent strands of his life to work in a cohesive whole. The collections and resources related to him are numerous, but scattered, so an online repository presenting his many sides from many places would not only be fitting, but also necessary. Fortunately, soon after embarking on this quest we were selected as fellows to participate in a National Endowment for the Humanities workshop called "Broadening the Digital Humanities" that sought scholars who would use a developing software framework called "Scalar" now in its alpha development stage at the University of Southern California.

Scalar is a new digital publishing platform from the Vectors Journal (vectorsjournal.org). From its inception Vectors Journal has been dedicated to the publication of scholarly content that would be impossible to print on paper.   Scalar continues that mission to encourage and explore the possibilities of digital scholarship. On its surface Scalar's interface is familiar, it has many similarities to popular blogging platforms like WordPress, but under it's hood, so to speak, it sees its mission and architecture as quite different. Without much in the way of user intervention, Scalar acts as a thin layer atop a varied, and growing list, of media archives. Resources from YouTube, Internet Archive, Critical Commons, are integrated seamlessly together.

It became clear early on, that the success of this project depended on networking media from a wide variety of sources in an array of different forms. Some examples of the media we are using are pictured in Figure 1.
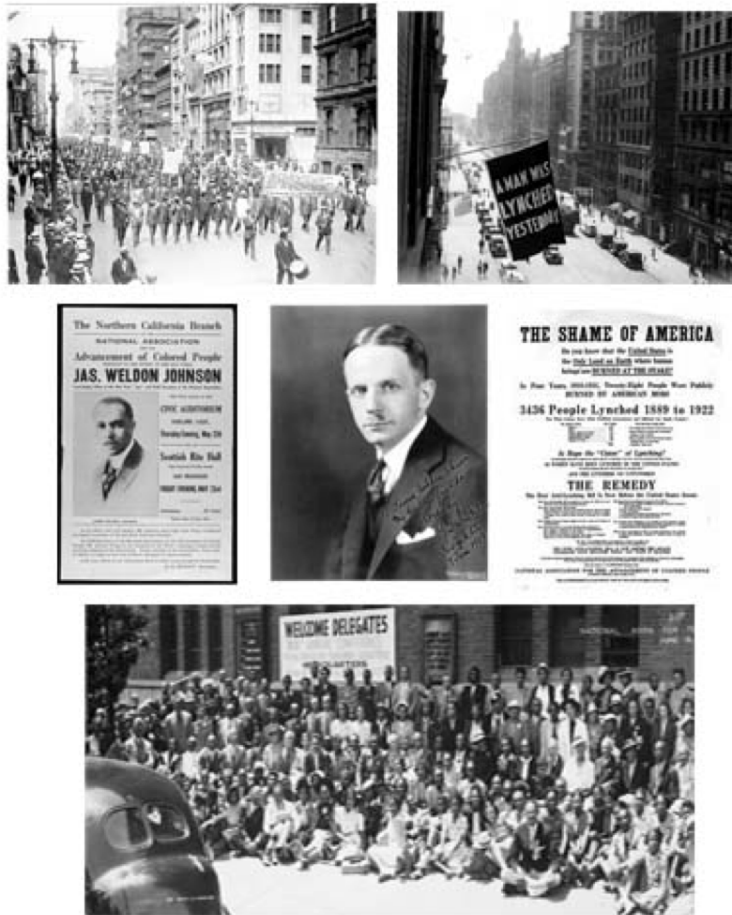
Figure 1

We collected material from libraries and archives at venues ranging from the National Archives and Library of Congress to Smith College, the New York Public Library's Schomburg Collection, Yale University's Beinecke Rare Book Library and the University of Massachusetts' Du Bois Library. This material included text, photographs, video and audio clips. Fortunately some of the media were already online or at least digitized. Some of them were available at no or minimal cost, but the format, quality, and size of media in these holdings varied greatly. The requirements of media online are significantly less onerous than that of broadcast or print, and with Scalar we were able to utilize this material along with clips from feature films hosted by Critical Commons or YouTube. The platform's open "come as you are" approach helped maintain our project's cohesion.

Our ultimate goal with this project is to weave together these materials into a public educational project that will be open to all. One of the main strengths of the Scalar platform is in the extensive ways one can connect different pieces of information together. The platform's basic unit is the "page" which is a combination of text from the site and media drawn in from outside sources on the Internet. To facilitate the flow from one page to another, Scalar implements "paths" to organize collections of pages. "notes", brief annotations, and "tags" or descriptive markers round out the basic structures. Our challenge was finding ways to use these building blocks to tell stories and form arguments about African American history in the first half of the twentieth century. Our process owed as much to the design of a museum as it did the traditional expository writing.

We first thought about breaking up concepts into their smallest narrative unit, that is, a self-contained bit of the story, capable of function both in and out of the context of its neighbors. In order to map this emerging network of ideas, we used the Visual Understanding Environment (VUE) mind-mapping software developed by Tufts University.
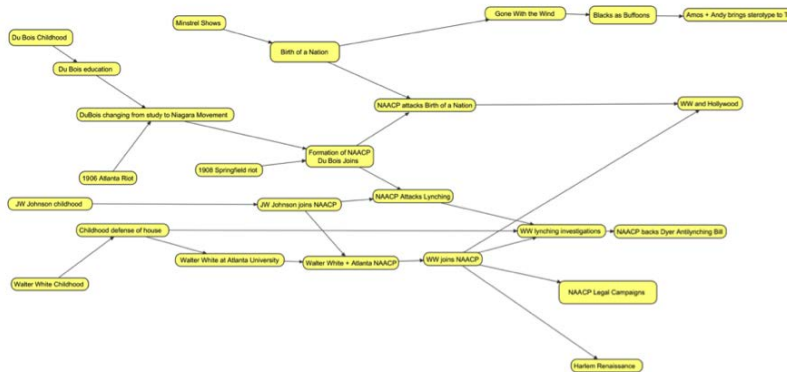

Figure 2

An example is Figure 2. Each oval node in the diagram corresponds to a page in Scalar. The lines show potential order for them as we assemble the individual pages into paths, that is groups of pages. With this rough skeleton in place we began to populate each path with relevant text and media resources. Some of these were simply matching text to photographs, but more commonly it was matching text and different kinds of media e.g. audio, feature film clips, documentary film clips, slide shows of photographs, pages of a graphic novel or combinations of these.

Scalar comes with a selection of templates for each page, which an author can assign to arrange the text and media contained within it. In line with its philosophy of open architecture though, the author merely selects the default view. Each reader is capable of viewing each page in whichever template they wish. This loss of authorial control definitely took some getting used to, but in the end non-linearity is best expressed by user freedom.
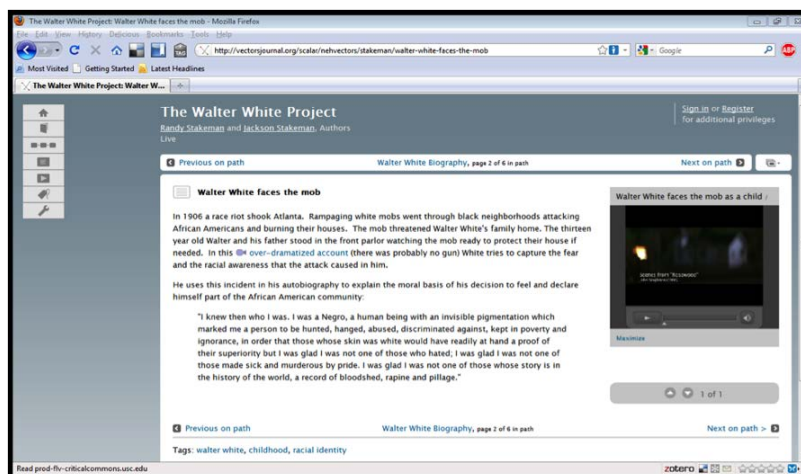

Figure 3

Figure 3 shows an example of a page in its text-centered template. For this page in the project, the

text includes an explanation of why this incident was so important to White and a quote from Walter White's autobiography. The media component is a combination of a scene from the feature film Rosewood (without its audio) mixed with audio of Walter White himself taken from a radio broadcast in the 1940's explaining the importance to him of this event. The key was finding that combination of text and available media that told the story best. The feature film clip showed a mob advancing on a house displaying white violence and capturing the fear of African Americans that White sought to portray in his radio account. Each page produced will have its own identity with a range of media and text sources.

Developing paths was also conceptually challenging. We strove to curate pages into meaningful narrative arcs. We organized paths into themes, various chronologies, or biographical narratives. Walter White's biography is the backbone of the project but since his life functions as a nexus of different historical threads, it is far from the totality. For example Walter White joined the national office of the NAACP in 1918. To make sense of what has led to this, one must not only know White's biography till this point, but also the history of the NAACP to that point. To understand the history of the NAACP it was necessary to explain the stories of W.E.B. Du Bois and James Weldon Johnson until 1918. Thus pages and paths about the formation of the NAACP, Du Bois and Johnson became part of the project.

Tags served as another important organizational feature to move not only between pages, but paths as well. For example we labeled "childhood" the biographies of James Weldon Johnson, W.E.B. Du Bois and Walter White before they embarked on their adult careers.   There is no path called childhood, but because of the tag a reader can simply sort through all the material filtering out everything not involving childhood. In the same way one could ask for all the Walter White or W.E.B. Du Bois audio clips used in the project, photographs of James Weldon Johnson, or feature film clips etc. and re-purpose them in new user defined narratives.

These basic templates and structures allow for a tremendous amount of design control without much web design expertise. For the more adventurous though, Scalar allows for the insertion of HTML and JavaScript. We are taking advantage of this to use various slide shows, widgets, and even a geo-spatial interfaced based on Google Earth.
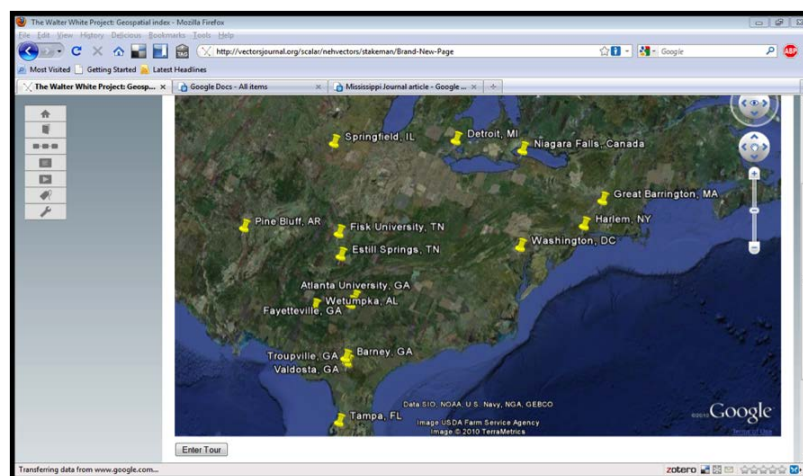

Figure 4

Figure 4 shows the Google Earth interface with which we are experimenting. The pushpins

represent the geographical locations where some key events in the project happened. They act as yet another way to navigate through the Scalar project, allowing the user to get a sense of place and context for the events described. This view allows one to see geographic and spatial patterns that may not be obvious or even observable from the pages themselves.

The project has around fifty pages and we are currently working to produce more pages and paths. At the same time we are also looking for ways we can work new HTML code into Scalar to increase its capacities. The University of Southern California developers of Scalar, Eric Loyer and Craig Dietrich, are also working to develop new capabilities for it and to fix bugs in it. Until then we'll continue developing the project up to and past Scalar's release date.

Jackson Stakeman attended Wesleyan University and the University of Southern California where he earned a B.A. in Critical Studies from the School of Cinematic Arts with a Minor in Digital Studies and a Honors in Multimedia Scholarship. Long fascinating by the intersections of culture, semiotics, technology, and media production he now splits his time between Los Angeles and the internet.

Randolph Stakeman earned his B.A. from Wesleyan University and his Ph D. from Stanford University. For thirty years he worked as a professor at Bowdoin College, a small liberal arts college, before retiring and stepping away to look at where the profession was going. Not only has he been an African and African American historian and a teacher, he has also been a dean in student affairs, a dean in academic/faculty affairs, a department chair, director of an interdisciplinary program, director of a study abroad program, and director of two grant programs. Lately he has been exploring new ways in which digital tools might help professors and archivists.