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African American Studies Collections and the American Season of Redemption

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What do you mean, Her Majesty's London? / Where do you think all her majesty come from?
—*Sweet Shop Boys*

Abstract

In a *Journal of Academic Librarianship* article that appeared in 2000, Susan A. Vega García writes about the “dearth of empirical research that has examined multicultural diversity in terms of actual collecting patterns of academic and research libraries [. . .]” (Vega García, 2000). This article, nearly 20 years old, is one of the few that actually address the topic of African American Studies collections specifically in the LIS literature. Though there is, in fact, a literature of “diversity” in library collections, it lumps together an array of groups whose only commonality is having been labeled Other in the United States. This lumping is a morally blinkered, intellectually lazy move that both ignores the specificity of different groups’ experiences and perspectives and centers whiteness and the West.

With the non-African American Studies librarian in mind, this paper highlights African American Studies collections’ importance to both the U.S. educational institutions’ intellectual life and the larger society in which they are located; encourages creative and critical thinking; and helps to conceptualize collaborations with African American Studies specialist or liaison colleagues and techniques for promoting these collections to internal and external audiences.

Introduction

One of my tasks as a practicum student at Steenbock Library, the life sciences library at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, during the summer 2017 semester was creating a book display. I knew I wanted my display to address African American Studies; yet, oddly, I confess to feeling a bit sheepish about making this disciplinary connection to a collection that supported the research interests, by and large, of the University of Wisconsin’s College of Agriculture and Life Sciences.

That is, I initially fell prey to the tired assumption that Black Americans are urban, a word that now does double duty as a euphemism for Blackness—with shadings of crime and poverty. I really knew better. The more I thought about it, seeking African American Studies in agricultural collections is a near-perfect proposition, for, as I would mention in the book display’s poster, Black Americans were largely a rural people, agricultural workers, for the overwhelming majority of their history in the United States; in fact, those demographic patterns didn’t begin to shift until the 20th century. The reason Black people were so overwhelmingly rural for so long is the same reason that African American Studies is a matter of interest to us all: the legacy of chattel slavery in the United States.

First of all, though, what exactly is African American Studies? Below is the by no means exhaustive definition I gave at a reference desk training session for graduate assistants at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign in spring 2018:

African American Studies is the interdisciplinary study of sub-Saharan African–descended peoples in the Americas (North and South); the Caribbean; other parts of the Diaspora, including European countries like the UK, Germany, and France; Australia; and, in some contexts, the interaction between those Diaspora populations or phenomena and the sub-Saharan African continent.

African American Studies is germane not only to Black people, but rather to everyone with any sort of stake in U.S. society or the Western world. As Susan A. Vega García wrote in one of the few articles that address African American Studies collections specifically in the LIS literature: “The viewpoint that racial and ethnic materials are relevant only to their respective populations is an outdated and erroneous approach to collection development, especially for ARLs that must help prepare students for their entry into the real world” (Vega García, 2000). There are two fundamental reasons for this: there is no

American culture without African American or Black culture, to begin with, and because, actually, there is no West at all without Black people.

To wit, the so-called developed world issued from the Industrial Revolution, which relied solely upon slave labor for the planting and harvesting of that all-important crop—cotton—whose processing enriched so many in the United States and England. As historian Edward Baptist points out in *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism*, “Enslaved African Americans built the modern United States, and indeed the entire modern world, in ways both obvious and hidden” (Baptist, 2014).

Along with cotton, crops like tobacco, rice, indigo, and sugar were extremely lucrative commodities produced by slave labor in colonies held by the British and other European powers. In the catalogue for the 2014 Yale Center for British Art exhibit *Figures of Empire: Slavery and Portraiture in Eighteenth-Century Atlantic Britain*, the curators write: “Wealth derived from the labor of enslaved Africans helped to transform Britain, and especially London, Bristol, and Liverpool, into dazzling cultural centers” (Yale Center for British Art, 2014).

The United States as a society cannot move forward if we the people fail to understand or simply ignore slavery—both its mechanisms and outcomes. Denying the existence or severity of the nation’s original infection, refusing treatment while it spreads and putrefies, eventually results in the destruction of the entire body (politic). This much is evident in the ongoing spectacle of the nation’s most prestigious universities very publicly coming to terms with their respective legacies of slavery. Hopefully, though, some light has been shed on why African American Studies is crucial to understanding the modern world as we know it.

Literature Review

Unfortunately, not a great deal has been written about African American Studies collections specifically in the library and information studies literature. A search using the term *African American Studies OR Black Studies* in the Library & Information Science Source database yields no more than 35 hits in peer-reviewed scholarly journals between 1939 and 2018. Moreover, many of these results are reviews, short items about recent and forthcoming titles, and generalized diversity-related topics.

The 2006 article “Africana Resources in Four Selected US Academic Research Libraries” was the most salient, making similar assumptions and asking similar questions. Written by Afeworki Paulos and Robert P. Holley, two librarians in Michigan at the time of writing, its concerns are fairly straightforward: “The authors examined Africana holdings in four selected academic libraries with particular emphasis on acquisitions from four Africa-based publishers and compared results with faculty size, course offerings, and the number of doctoral dissertations” (Paulos & Holley, 2006). The authors chose institutions based on their African Studies programs’ reputations, evaluating “the relationship between program strength and library collections” (Paulos & Holley, 2006).

Glendora Johnson-Cooper laid a foundation in the 1994 article “Building Racially Diverse Collections: An Afrocentric Approach,” writing: “We are at a point in time where the lives of people who look, feel, talk and ARE different from the dominant European culture are demanding validation and recognition” (Johnson-Cooper, 1994). This is because, she takes pains to say explicitly, “all humans have contributed to world development and the flow of knowledge and information and that most human achievements are the result of mutually interactive international effort” (Johnson-Cooper, 1994). She addresses this bluntly to dispatch the notion, reeking of 19th-century pseudoscientific racial theories, that every good and true thing came from the West/Europe/whiteness. Libraries, Johnson-Cooper posits, have an important role in “help[ing] prepare people for the responsibilities of living in a diverse, democratic society,” because of the access they provide to diverse sources of information (Johnson-Cooper, 1994).

In the September 2000 article “Racial and Ethnic Diversity in Academic Library Collections: Ownership and Access of African American and U.S. Latino Periodical Literature,” Susan A. Vega García writes that “there is a dearth of empirical research that has examined multicultural diversity in terms of actual collecting patterns of academic and research libraries [. . .]” (Vega García, 2000). This is to say that when diversity in library settings is discussed, the focus is seldom on the collections or acquisitions. Vega García’s study concludes echoing Johnson-Cooper’s view of libraries’ responsibility: “racial/ethnic periodicals representing cultural and gender differences, as well as diverse perspectives within minority groups are being excluded or marginalized from ARL collections and indexes and abstracting services” (Vega García, 2000).

Courtney L. Young has written on the wider topic of “multicultural” or “diverse” collections. In “Collection Development and Diversity on CIC Academic Library Web Sites,” she evaluates Committee on Institutional Cooperation libraries’ websites for diversity information presentation. “While it can be assumed that academic libraries acquire materials related to diversity, and libraries are using their Web sites to bring together information on topics in a variety of disciplines, are libraries using their Web sites to represent these diverse collections? Are other diversity-related activities represented on the libraries’ Web site?” (Young, 2006).

In “Diversity Collection Assessment in Large Academic Libraries,” an article Young co-authored with Matthew P. Ciszek four years later, the topic is a great deal more complex. Specifically, they want to know how, in the context of “large multi-branch/multi-campus academic library collections,” the diversity of collections themselves is effectively assessed (Ciszek & Young, 2010).

Collaboration

Because of the field’s interdisciplinarity, there should be relatively few barriers to collaborating with African American Studies librarian colleagues. What does collaboration mean? In my context as an academic librarian at a Research 1 institution, I’m professionally socialized to view myself as a collaborator or partner with the departmental faculty whose research I support.

For librarians of all sorts, it would seem to mean working with others as an equal partner for the benefit of all parties. When I talk about librarians collaborating with other librarians—that is, librarians whose specialty isn’t African American Studies working with those whose specialty is—the same obviously holds true.

Linda Ueki Absher and Melissa Cardenas-Dow’s bracing “Collaborative Librarianship: A Minority Opinion” offers a long-overdue perspective held by two nonwhite librarians on working together that we might do well to heed. They write:

Librarian collaboration is about survival: survival of not only our profession, but educational and cultural survival of the people we serve or hope to serve. In these days of rapid technological change and an information infrastructure that

morphs with this change, librarians will need to become comfortable with being the other—to develop the ability to not only work in the in-between spaces on behalf of those who depend upon us, but to understand them. (Ueki Absher & Cardenas-Dow, 2016)

Collaboration, to my way of thinking, is an inherent good; though the explicit benefits or rewards of collaborating are the multiplication of ideas, resources, abilities, and so on, and, certainly not least of all, the development of collegial work relationships.

African American Studies as a field is by nature interdisciplinary, so the only limit on avenues for collaboration would be one’s imagination and willingness. Some possibilities probably spring readily to mind: history or English, sociology, education, performance studies, media. But I want to challenge us to think creatively; perhaps our very understanding of “interdisciplinary” itself is incomplete. Because, as the discussion of slavery and its ongoing aftermath should have illustrated, other fruitful ground for collaborating with African American Studies colleagues are myriad, including oceanography, economics, jurisprudence, horticulture, political science, ethics, agriculture, shipbuilding, religious studies, history of science, epidemiology, botany, architecture, archaeology, and so forth. It should be apparent that collaboration with African American Studies librarian colleagues will bring a new dimension, added depth, to the work being done in libraries. Engaging with African American Studies reveals the incompleteness of work that is not informed by it.

Programming

I see the heart of my job as helping people engage with the library’s offerings. Namely, the most effective way of getting various audiences excited about the information and resources libraries provide is through outreach/engagement. Here, I refer to events. As a level of meaning-making, experience is a common, accessible paradigm through which people understand their lives. Events make it possible for attendees to locate themselves in the collections we are responsible for stewarding; they are a catalyst, activating collections’ significance to publics as disparate as undergraduates listlessly fulfilling a requirement, community members who historically have been made to feel unwelcome on campus, and subject experts.

Most of all, effective, memorable events must serve *users'* needs. Joe Clark, head of the Performing Arts Library at Kent State, offers this: "User-centered events generally enhance already existing patron activities, allow for mutually beneficial collaborations with stakeholders, and provide value-added opportunities for participants" (Clark, 2012).

To illustrate briefly, in 2017, letterpress printer Amos Paul Kennedy Jr. was the special guest at the History, Philosophy, and Newspaper Library's (HPNL) open house. HPNL coordinated with the Rare Book and Manuscript Library, the Krannert Center for Performing Arts, and the art department to display holdings of Mr. Kennedy's work, organize a lunch with local artists, and address an undergraduate printmaking class, respectively.

As I mentioned, for me, the coin of the realm in the library world is events—whether it's called engagement or outreach or programming. The vehicle for collaboration should be suited to audiences' needs, be it a curriculum, class, workgroup, article, research resource, tool, and so on.

And as with collaboration itself, I think the only limits for promotion are those of our imagination.

Marketing

To wit, in fall 2018 the History, Philosophy, and Newspaper Library celebrated pop megastar Beyoncé's birthday after her historical Coachella set, replete with African American cultural signifiers; her embarkation on a world tour with her now-elder statesman rapper spouse Jay Z; and the surprise release of their joint album whose first music video was filmed in the Louvre earlier in the year. This artistic fructification came hard on the heels of her Peabody Award-winning album *Lemonade* and giving birth to twins. HPNL's celebration was replete with a party at which a Tidal playlist curated by the author played pleasingly in the background; on-theme decorations that gestured to Beyoncé's oeuvre; snacks, including lemonade (obviously) and cupcakes in the appropriate color scheme; and the world's first Beyoncé haiku contest.

To promote the event, HPNL created a poster and used social media, including a blog post, Twitter, and the library listserv. Arguably, the world's first Beyoncé haiku contest was in itself a marketing strategy. For Twitter, we used popular Beyoncé-related hashtags and urged colleagues to like and retweet.

As I learned through other efforts like organizing the Fashion, Style, and Aesthetics Reading Group at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, the key to event marketing is relentlessness. "It is difficult to over-publicize library events," is Clark's understated advice (Clark, 2012). A willingness to scour the Internet for listservs, calendars, and e-mail addresses is all the more important if campus or community communication is at all decentralized, as is the forethought to tuck fliers or cards in one's bag for pressing upon colleagues (and passersby) and splashing across bulletin boards.

It goes without saying that the means should suit the ends. For example, if undergraduates are the target audience, sidestep Facebook in favor of a more "with-it" platform. Or if the event, for example, an exhibit, has a visual element, Instagram is likely an effective choice. Contests can be a good way to get audiences invested. If all else fails, everyone does love images of cats.

Conclusion

As I've said, the reason, for me, to put on events or convene a reading group is facilitating engagement with or access to collections—or even simply letting people know the collections *exist*. At our natal celebration for Beyoncé in September we placed an assortment of books for partygoers' delectation on the table with the snacks, craftily placing front and center very visually driven recently acquired books. This included volumes about fashion in Africa, graphic novels, and catalogues from Kehinde Wiley shows. I was tickled that attendees asked if items were available for immediate check-out (rather than only display), sat down to peruse books, and left the party with materials they had checked out.

When we talk about "diversity," or, as I like to call it, fairness, in libraries we generally talk about hiring practices, which we should definitely be doing. But, as Susan A. Vega García's words and the underwhelming agriculture-related results illustrated to me, African American Studies collections representation matters.

To think back to my practicum at the life sciences library at UW-Madison mentioned in the introduction, perhaps finding so few titles related to African Americans and agriculture, *of all things*, was an irritant needed for something of value to grow. With events like the Beyoncé birthday party and the HPNL

Open House, I want to invite our audiences in (literally!) to show them that the library is a place where, *of course*, they belong. I don't want them to look

far to see themselves and people like their families in our venerated collections. If that's the case, how could libraries be more necessary, more relevant?

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