

Comics in Special Collections: Purposeful Collection Development for Promoting Inclusive History

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In 2005, the *Masters of American Comics* exhibition organized by two prestigious Los Angeles museums, the Hammer Museum and the Museum of Contemporary Art, featured “work by 15 masters of comic art, ranging from the early twentieth-century Sunday pages of Winsor McCay to the contemporary graphic novels of Chris Ware.”¹ While this exhibit was an important milestone in the legitimization of comics as an art form, it also garnered criticism for its selection of all male, heterosexual, cis-gendered, and white artists for inclusion in the canon it was at-

1 Ann Philbin and Jeremy Strick, “Director’s Foreword,” in *Masters of American Comics*, eds. John Carlin, Paul Karasik, and Brian Walker (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 11. It should be noted that the authors go on to say “Narrowing the selection from the wide range of artists who have produced comics over the last century was a challenging process, and we hope this exhibition will open the doors for future museum presentations that reflect the diversity in the medium as it further evolves in the twenty-first century.”

tempting to establish.² Similarly, in 2016, Angoulême’s Festival International de la Bande Dessinée (FIBD) created a controversy in the comics community when a list of thirty candidates for its lifetime achievement Grand Prix award was circulated without a single non-male artist included. Both of these occurred in spite of the dramatic increase in female creators, LGBTQ persons, and people of color choosing to tell their stories through comics in the last twenty-five years. When interviewed about the imbalance among Grand Prix nominees, FIBD executive director Franck Bondoux stated, “There are unfortunately few women in the history of comics. It’s a reality. If you go to the Louvre, you will also find few female artists.”³

Bondoux is mistaken. Women have been working as cartoonists since the 1800s, with a particularly rich history in the United States.⁴ How is it that the executive director of the second-largest comics festival in Europe could be so uneducated on the makeup of the field? To understand this, one need only look at the histories that have been written and repeated on comics—largely by white, male fans and academics, and about white, male cartoonists. From annual “best of” lists to reviews, class syllabi, and award nominee rosters, the comics canon that has been fabricated largely favors work by and for a white, male, heteronormative readership. Have libraries contributed to this problem? Comics collection development literature often recommends that librarians start their collections by look-

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- 2 Carly Berwick, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Comic-book Artists?” *ARTNews*, November 1, 2005, <http://www.artnews.com/2005/11/01/why-have-there-been-no-great-women-comic-book-artists/>. See also Bart Beaty and Benjamin Woo, “Not by a White Man?” in *The Greatest Comic Book of All Time: Symbolic Capital and the Field of American Comic Books* (New York: Palgrave Pivot, 2016), 97–107. One notable exception to the exhibited artists is *Krazy Kat* cartoonist George Herriman, who successfully passed as white for the entirety of his career.
 - 3 Frédéric Potet, “Le Festival de BD d’Angoulême Accusé de Sexisme après une Sélection 100 % Masculine” [The Angoulême Comics Festival Accused of Sexism after a 100% Male Selection], *Le Monde*, May 1, 2016, https://www.lemonde.fr/bande-dessinee/article/2016/01/05/le-festival-de-bd-d-angouleme-accuse-de-sexisme-apres-une-selection-100-masculine_4842193_4420272.html#koYJHbkfuVdxg5XF.99.
 - 4 At the turn-of-the-century, the highest paid female illustrator in the United States was a cartoonist: *Keupie* creator Rose O’Neill. Carlynn Trout, “Rose O’Neill (1874–1944),” accessed May 29, 2018, <https://shsmo.org/historicmissourians/name/o/oneill/>.

ing at what is being reviewed and written about,⁵ which unfortunately can make for biased and unvaried holdings. How are we defining what is worth inclusion and exposure? In a 2016 interview for *The Guardian*, comics journalist Tom Spurgeon comments, “It’s actually very easy to rewrite the history of comics. It happens all the time. You rewrite history by putting people on these lists.”⁶ Spurgeon posits that comics history has not failed these institutions—but those in power have failed to thoroughly research, understand, and address its diverse heritage.

The comics community and industry continues to face issues related to the exclusion of female, minority, and marginalized voices. A pointedly anti-diversity campaign in mainstream comics targeted at women and people of color regularly makes headlines in comics news. It is housed within and protected by the anonymity of social media and YouTube and is fueled by similar viewpoints as the American alt-right movement. In 2017, a variety of controversies arose that culminated in what was coined “Comicsgate” (*à la* “Gamergate,” an upheaval in the video game community over problems with harassment and bigotry).⁷ The central belief among this group is that “SJWs” or “social justice warriors” (a derogatory term for progressives) are responsible for the movement among publishers to create more “diverse” storylines in comics including LGBTQ relationships, characters re-imagined as female or non-white, and other changes that they feel are ruining comics. These issues, rooted in fandom, are a direct response to the homogeneous, white, and heteronormative storyline and character standards that comics have historically conformed to, and that the industry, educators, and readers have been implicit in exclusively celebrating. As publishers finally begin to

5 Liorah Anne Golomb, “So Many Options, So Little Money: Building a Selective Collection for the Academic Library,” in *Graphic Novels and Comics in Libraries and Archives: Essays on Readers, Research, History and Cataloging*, ed. Robert G. Weiner (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010).

6 Lauren McCubbin, “The Not-So-Secret History of Comics Drawn by Women,” *The Guardian*, January 10, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/jan/10/women-comics-not-so-secret-history>.

7 Asher Elbein, “#Comicsgate: How an Anti-Diversity Harassment Campaign in Comics Got Ugly—and Profitable,” *The Daily Beast*, April 2, 2018, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/comicsgate-how-an-anti-diversity-harassment-campaign-in-comics-got-uglyand-profitable>. People targeted in Comicsgate include female Marvel editor Heather Antos, Muslim mainstream comic book writer G. Willow Wilson, and African American comics blogger and cartoonist Darryl Ayo Brathwaite.

challenge these archetypes, educators and librarians must do their part in honoring the hidden history and evolving landscape of comics.

When the Billy Ireland Cartoon Library & Museum (BICLM) was founded in 1977 at The Ohio State University (OSU), collecting comics material in a university library was itself an act of critical librarianship by making a place in the academy for a popular art form long shunned by libraries. Forty years later, BICLM has become the largest comprehensive collection of cartoon and comics material in the world. BICLM increasingly seeks to create and elevate collections of underrepresented artists and communities, and to highlight cartoon art related to social justice issues through targeted acquisitions, exhibitions, programming, integration in higher education curricula, and digital projects. As more academic libraries begin collecting comic and cartoon art materials, there is an opportunity to do so with a strategic eye toward building distinct collections around specific areas of critical interest. Scholars and students can only study and explore materials that they can freely access. It is imperative that, as academic librarians, we expand our collecting beyond the materials that are the easiest to obtain because they are published and distributed through established channels.

This chapter will argue for the need for special collections and archives to proactively collect, catalog, and promote materials that support social justice, inclusivity, and diverse narratives. We will discuss some of the challenges librarians face in acquiring and describing materials from underrepresented communities, particularly in light of the non-traditional publishing and distribution methods contemporary creators are using. We will conclude by discussing opportunities for applying concepts of collective collecting across institutions. Advocating for academic libraries, and special collections in particular, to collect in underrepresented areas can ensure greater visibility for comics artists whose work is often left out of the canon.

Literature Review

Most literature on critical librarianship published so far has focused on diversity in terms of staffing⁸ and action within public libraries⁹ and academic libraries.¹⁰

8 Michelle Gohr, "Ethnic and Racial Diversity in Libraries: How White Allies Can Support Arguments for Decolonization," *Journal of Radical Librarianship*, vol. 3 (2017): 42–58.

9 Julie Edwards, "'Reflecting the World Increasingly Made Right': From Response to Action in Public Libraries," *Progressive Librarian*, no. 45 (2016/2017): 87–94.

10 Stephen Bales, *The Dialectic of Academic Librarianship: A Critical Approach* (Sacramento: Library Juice, 2015).

To date, only one work discusses critical librarianship explicitly in relation to comics in library instruction.¹¹ With this chapter, we hope to shift the emphasis to critical librarianship in special collections, and even further to discuss cartoons and comics in special collections.

As permanent repositories of cultural material, it is crucial that special collections take time to consider whose stories they are choosing to preserve for future generations and telling through instruction and exhibits. Kenny Garcia provides a framework for considering critical librarianship in academia, and reminds us that “information is not neutral, thus the way that information is presented by librarians adds meaning and context for students.”¹² This approach-based (and not product-based) way of thinking allows us to take that necessary step back and rewire our processes.

Several articles have focused specifically on special collections and archives. Brian Keogh presents a model for addressing the lack of historical records for traditionally under-documented groups and topics.¹³ In Ashley Farmer’s article about the experiences of black scholars in archives, she asserts that archivists, along with scholars and activists, must continue to dispute “the very idea of ‘the archive’—from the privileging of certain types of artifacts to the scope, structure, and function of the institution.”¹⁴ Outlining the history of whitewashing in American archives, Lae’l Hughes-Watkins’s powerful article summarizes scholarship in the past twenty years, calling for mainstream repositories to be more inclusive of non-dominant voices and communities, and provides examples of recent reparative efforts. Drawing on the writings of Howard Zinn,¹⁵ Hughes-Watkins

11 Damian Duffy, “Out of the Margins ... Into the Panels: Toward a Theory of Comics as a Medium of Critical Pedagogy in Library Instruction,” in *Critical Library Instruction: Theories and Methods*, eds. Emily Drabinski, Alana Kumbier, and Maria Accardi (Sacramento: Library Juice, 2010), 199–219.

12 Kenny Garcia, “Keeping Up With... Critical Librarianship,” Association of College and Research Libraries, June 19, 2015, http://www.ala.org/acrl/publications/keeping_up_with/critlib.

13 Brian Keough, “Documenting Diversity: Developing Special Collections of Underdocumented Groups,” *Library Collections, Acquisitions, and Technical Services*, 26 (2002): 241–51.

14 Ashley Farmer, “Archiving While Black,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, August 3, 2018, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Archiving-While-Black/243981>.

15 Howard Zinn, “Secrecy, Archives, and the Public Interest,” *MidWestern Archivist* 2, no. 2 (1977): 20.

writes, “Mainstream archives are steeped in a tradition that makes decisions about the existence, preservation, and availability of archives, documents, and records in our society on the basis of the distribution of wealth and power. It is this inequity that has created a systemic defect within traditional archives that has led to the marginalization, erasure, and oppression of historically underrepresented communities.”¹⁶ The article provides a roadmap for building reparative archives that involves acquisition, advocacy (through exhibitions and digitization), and utilization of materials that document historically underrepresented or marginalized sectors of our society. In this chapter, we will apply and expand Hughes-Watkins’s concept of the reparative archive specifically to comics and cartoon collections.

Collection Building

Too often in special collections, we decide what to acquire based on opportunities that are brought to us, whether by donors who seek us out or by what is available for purchase through dealers or auction houses. Inclusive, critical collecting requires a more proactive approach to address the fact that many of our existing collections and systems reflect the power and privilege of the dominant culture and are not as inclusive as we might hope.

Collection Development Policy

Standard practice in special collections is to craft a collection development policy that clearly articulates the scope of an institution’s collection, its strengths, and its current collecting priorities—including what to accept, or when to say no to donations.¹⁷ Applying a critical lens to your collection development policy, and revising it to be explicit about goals to include comics archives, publications,

16 Lae’l Hughes-Watkins, “Moving Toward a Reparative Archive: A Roadmap for a Holistic Approach to Disrupting Homogenous Histories in Academic Repositories and Creating Inclusive Spaces for Marginalized Voices,” *The Journal of Contemporary Archival Studies* 5 (2018): 2.

17 Elaine B. Smyth, “A Practical Approach to Writing a Collection Development Policy,” *Rare Books & Manuscripts Librarianship* 14 no. 1 (1999): 27–31, <https://rbml.acrl.org/index.php/rbml/article/view/164>.

artwork and other materials documenting under-represented groups, is an important step. Another option is to build a collection that documents the cartoon and comics response to particular social justice movements or topics with cultural significance, such as the Me Too movement, gun control, or Black Lives Matter.

One factor to consider when launching new initiatives is whether other areas or groups will need to be deprioritized, especially when resources are limited. If the goal is to diversify the collection and include previously underrepresented communities, does that mean limiting the acquisition of new materials from groups that are over-represented? In some cases, inclusivity and redressing past imbalances may mean acquiring the materials of comics creators who might not be as prominent or who might be known only within their own community or niche audience.

It is also critical that the wider organization is willing and able to commit the necessary resources to support the collection for the long term before launching these types of collecting initiatives. Institutional buy-in that will be sustained beyond the tenure of one individual librarian or archivist is important so that creators, donors and their communities feel their materials are appropriately preserved, described and promoted beyond the initial acquisition.

Acquisitions

Comic Conventions

Library scholarship has tackled the benefits and pitfalls of collecting and cataloging zines for years and the challenges in acquiring and caring for these are much the same as minicomics. The “zine librarian interest group,”¹⁸ formed in 2007, has documented a variety of aspects of collecting and utilizing zines, from cataloging, to teaching, to storage, which can be applied to minicomics as well. These materials are often not available through traditional book distributors and dealers. While mail-order and subscriptions are an intrinsic part of acquiring and trading zines, attending and purchasing at comic conventions is essential for minicomics. These expos have been on the rise since the 1970s and now occur in cities all over the United States and beyond. Some are organized by large convention companies, others by local groups and nonprofits, universities, libraries or

18 See <http://zinelibraries.info>.

museums.¹⁹ In recent years, conventions with specific diversity-driven missions have emerged. SÓL-CON: The Black and Brown Comix Expo, which celebrates the work of Latinx and African American creators, is held at OSU in conjunction with the Cartoon Crossroads Columbus festival.²⁰ The Latino Comics Expo, founded in 2011, takes place in different cities each year.²¹ I-CON, or Indigenous Comic Con, is the first ever comics convention to specifically feature Indigenous artists, writers, publishers, and more.²² In 2015, Comique Con, held at the Arab American National Museum in Dearborn, Michigan, became the first comic convention to feature women cartoonists exclusively.²³ All of these festivals signify a momentum toward diversifying the mainstream comics industry and community—and further, provide excellent opportunities for collection development of works by underrepresented artists.

Acquiring collection materials at conventions, either through purchases or solicited donations, also gives librarians the opportunity to interact directly with creators. This allows the librarian to raise awareness about the institution, its services and its collecting goals, as well as to build relationships that could lead to better description of the materials, future donations, and programming opportunities. These benefits can justify the investment of extra time (often on weekends) on the part of librarians.

On a practical note, bringing cash and a receipt book is a good idea, since not all creators can accept credit cards or have the ability to provide receipts. Policies may vary, but the business office at the OSU Libraries accepts handwritten receipts if signed by the seller. When using a credit card, either your own or the institution's, call ahead to warn the company that you'll be making lots of small purchases from different vendors on the same day. This chapter's authors have had their cards frozen due to fraud alerts.

Online resources

Recently, a few essential online resources have emerged—mostly developed by cartoonists and comics fans—to specifically highlight the work of marginalized

19 See: <http://www.conventionscene.com/schedules/comicbookconventions/>.

20 See: <https://odi.osu.edu/laser/programming/sol-con-the-brown-and-black-comix-expo/>.

21 See: <http://www.latinocomicsexpo.com/>.

22 See: <https://www.indigenouscomiccon.com/>.

23 See: <https://comiquecon.org/>.

artists. These sites are an excellent starting point for discovering potential materials for acquisition. The Queer Comics Database, whose mission is to “facilitate access to comics that contain queer representation,” was developed by a comic book retailer and librarian, and offers an approachable platform for searching works with detailed filters ranging from different identities to art styles (“sketchy,” “cartoony,” “stylized“ etc.).²⁴ The Cartoonists of Color Database and Queer Cartoonists databases were created and maintained by cartoonist MariNaomi and provide an encyclopedic look at the vast field of diverse creators.²⁵ Although not limited to cartoonists, the “Women Who Draw” directory is also an excellent resource for increasing “the visibility of female illustrators, emphasizing female illustrators of color, LGBTQ+, and other minority groups of female illustrators.”²⁶

Advisory Boards and Donor Partnerships

Developing an advisory board for collecting in critical areas may also be helpful. Academic librarians have the advantage of access to specialists from a wide variety of disciplines, who likely have relevant subject expertise. Community members might also be interested in sharing their knowledge and expertise. They can also provide contacts to the community and may even become donors themselves of materials they have created or collected.²⁷

If acquisitions funds are minimal, finding a private collector who is interested in donating a collection of materials can be an excellent way to diversify a collection. For example, BICLM received a large gift of original cartoon art from a collector who focused on women creators, many of whom were not previously represented in our collection. It’s also possible to collaborate with a donor who is willing to build a collection specifically for donation. Working with donors requires effective communication and setting clear expectations so that the donations are within scope and support collection development priorities.

24 “Queer Comics Database,” accessed October 2018, <http://queercomicsdatabase.com>.

25 “Queer Cartoonists Database,” accessed October 2018, <http://queercartoonists.com>; “Cartoonists of Color Database,” accessed October 2018, <http://cartoonistsofcolor.com>.

26 “Women Who Draw,” accessed October 2018, <http://www.womenwhodraw.com/>.

27 Kathryn M. Neal, “Cultivating Diversity: The Donor Connection,” *Collection Management* 27, no. 2 (2002): 36; and Keough, “Document Diversity,” 248.

Donor Cultivation

Although purchasing materials and collections is ideal, few special collections have unlimited resources for acquisitions and instead rely heavily on gifts-in-kind. BICLM is no exception. Our small acquisitions budget is generally used for purchasing publications and for shipping donations. Our collections of papers and original art have mostly been acquired through donation. Prospective donors can be identified and approached at conventions, through advisor introductions or word-of-mouth referrals, or using the traditional method of sending solicitation letters explaining the collecting initiative. Continuing to build and nurture these relationships is critically important and can be incredibly rewarding.

It can be an extra challenge to gain the confidence of potential donors when you are not a member of the community. Kathryn Neal attributes some of her success in building manuscript collections of African-American women to the fact that she is one herself, which helped her in establishing trust within that community. However, she concludes, “Any archivist with the right motives and approach could possibly succeed, but the operative words here are ‘right motives and approach.’ Absolutely critical to the decision to try to document any group is research and outreach.”²⁸ She also articulates her initial concern that donors she approached might be reluctant to entrust their materials to an academic institution that is part of the dominant culture.²⁹ Although she had not faced that specific challenge at the time she wrote her article, it is understandable that some donors from traditionally marginalized populations may not fully trust an institution’s new-found commitment to inclusivity and diversity. Understanding how your institution, its systems and its staff may have contributed to past injustices and exclusion and being able to articulate your commitment to redressing these wrongs may help overcome these very legitimate concerns.

Born-digital materials

Archivists and special collections librarians recognize that contemporary primary sources (papers, correspondence, artwork) are increasingly being created and distributed digitally. This can be especially true of cartoons and comics by creators from minority or marginalized communities who may not have access to more traditional (and resource-intensive) forms of print publication and distribution.

28 Neal, 40.

29 Neal, 38.

Collecting born-digital materials requires a platform that can preserve and organize the files and provide access to them. Archiving webcomics and other related sites is particularly important because the sites often include early versions of work, blogs by the creator, discussion and comments from readers and other materials with high research value.³⁰ Creators do not always maintain their sites, and some have already disappeared. Several efforts to build webcomics collections are underway. For example, the Library of Congress's Webcomics Web Archive specifies that it "includes work by artists and subjects not traditionally represented in mainstream comics, including women artists and characters, artists and characters of color, LGBTQ+ artists and characters, as well as subjects such as politics, health and human sexuality, and autobiography."³¹

Crowdfunding

Current library ordering systems and institutional regulations privilege the acquisition of material through established publishers and dealers. However, now more than ever, comics creators are relying on non-traditional methods like crowdfunding to support, publish, and distribute their work. This is particularly true for creators seeking to reach niche audiences, or small or marginalized communities, with publications that might not appeal to traditional publishers. Publishing platforms such as Kickstarter or Indiegogo present new challenges and opportunities. For creators, the incentive behind crowd-funded publishing is that production costs are folded into the initial "pledge" made by the donors, and supporters are essentially pre-ordering their copy of the book in advance of its creation. For the librarian, supporting a crowd-funded project means taking an active role in being part of the creator's publishing process and showing direct support. Further, unlike a traditional acquisition, crowd-funded projects often have options for various levels of support, which come with ephemeral and exclusive "bonus" materials (e.g. minicomics, original art, stickers, a "thank you" or credit in the final project) that are produced in limited quantities and may have research value. Many of

30 See: Megan Halsband and Stephanie Grimm, "Panel Problems: Issues and Opportunities for Webcomics Archives," *Art Documentation: Journal of the Art Libraries Society of North America* 37, no. 2 (Fall 2018): 119–40.

31 Library of Congress, "About this Collection," Webcomics Web Archive, accessed October 2018, <https://www.loc.gov/collections/webcomics-web-archive/about-this-collection/>.

these works are not distributed outside of their crowdfund campaign, meaning that the only way for a library to acquire the material is to participate in the campaign. Patreon, a monthly subscription-based form of crowd-funding support, also often yields exclusive publications depending on the level of paid support.

Librarians may find logistical barriers to supporting these platforms, which will require working closely with business and acquisitions offices to navigate. One challenge is that the books often do not see publication for a year or more following the completion of the campaign. It may also be against policy for the institution's credit card number to be kept "on file" in an account, which is necessary for a Kickstarter pledge or a Patreon subscription. The BICLM has worked with our business office to develop a pilot program that will enable us to support a limited number of Kickstarter campaigns provided that we document whether or not the campaign is successful, and receipt of the physical item. Much like attending comic expos, supporting creators through these platforms allows librarians and their institutions to be more visible and embedded in the creator community.³²

Discovery and Engagement

Archives and special collections have traditionally accepted more materials than they could process with their limited resources. In spite of efforts to address this problem in a comprehensive way, there are still many "hidden" collections awaiting cataloging.³³ Prioritizing collections that bring in historically oppressed voices

32 Recent relevant comics projects from Kickstarter include Tara Avery and Jon Macy's (eds.) *ALPHABET: An Anthology of LGBTQIA Creators*, and Taneka Stotts' (ed.) *ELEMENTS: Fire—A Comics Anthology by Creators of Color*.

33 See for example: Mark Greene and Dennis Meissner, "More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing," *The American Archivist* 68, no. 2 (2005): 208–63; Jack McCarthy, Celia Caust-Ellenbogen, and Sarah Leu, "Building an Inclusive Community of Archival Practice: The Historical Society of Pennsylvania's Hidden Collections Initiative for Pennsylvania Small Archival Repositories," *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 83, no. 1 (2016): 97–102; Alexis E. Ramsey, "Viewing the Archives: The Hidden and the Digital," in *Working in the Archives: Practical Research Methods for Rhetoric and Composition*, eds. Alexis E. Ramsey, Wendy B. Sharer, Barbara L'Eplattenier, Lisa S. Mastrangelo (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2010), 79–90.

and disrupt the dominant narrative is an important step in creating reparative archives and collections, even if it means deprioritizing other collections.

Traditional cataloging and classification systems were originally created and designed to reflect and privilege the powerful and dominant sectors of society and have only relatively recently begun to address this problem. Extra research and effort may be required to catalog materials from underrepresented communities in a respectful way that also enables widespread discovery.

Collections can inspire programming around critical themes or respond to current events relating to social justice, civil rights, and underrepresented communities. At BICLM, we feature numerous exhibitions that explore human rights issues or highlight the work of traditionally underrepresented groups. Exhibits include *The Long March: Civil Rights in Cartoon and Comics*; *Graphic Details: Confessional Comics by Jewish Women*; and *Tales from la Vida: Latinx Comics*, as well as an exhibition on immigration which is described in more detail in the case study below. Formal exhibition space is not necessary. Pop-up displays or open house events can be just as effective. In our reading room, we have collaborated with academic departments to host themed open houses highlighting works by Middle Eastern cartoonists, Japanese manga, and Latinx materials.

Programs can also respond directly to current events, holidays, and heritage months. For example, Transgender Day of Visibility could present an opportunity to draw attention to work in the collection by trans creators. Following the 2015 *Charlie Hebdo* shootings in Paris, we collaborated with our Popular Culture Studies program to quickly organize a mini-symposium that included panelists from the French & Italian and Near Eastern Languages & Cultures departments. We were also able to share our collection holdings with attendees who hoped to learn more about the often-controversial magazine.

Instruction

Teaching with primary source material in special collections can be a powerful experience for students, what Lae'l Hughes-Watkins describes as “a chance to change minds, society, and policy, and to inspire restorative justice.”³⁴ In order to get students interested in special collections, it's easy to rely on an instinct to “wow” them with exciting, recognizable material. While high-profile material provides a good “hook” for catching students' attention and curiosity about archival

34 Hughes-Watkins, “Moving Toward a Reparative Archive,” 9.

materials, Hughes-Watkins reminds us that “documentation from traditionally invisible communities becomes increasingly critical in these interactions.”³⁵ At BICLM, we have embedded collection materials in Women’s, Gender & Sexuality Studies classes to examine how female creators have been sublimated throughout history, and in Jewish Studies classes to explore how sons of Jewish-American immigrants built the comics industry after being shut out of jobs in other art fields due to anti-Semitism.

Institution course catalogs can help identify new audiences and departments. Charlotte Cubbage recommends (if your particular institution’s course catalog has this capability) searching for relevant keywords such as “graphic novels” and “comic books,”³⁶ but this can be expanded to include certain critical subject matters like “migration studies,” “citizenship,” or “social justice.”

Case Studies: Billy Ireland Cartoon Library and Museum

Collecting Comics by Indigenous Creators

At BICLM, one of our primary strategic priorities is to expand our collections to include cartoon and comic art, publications, archives and other materials by and related to previously underrepresented populations. One such population is indigenous creators. A survey of our collection indicated that it was weak in this area, a reflection of how academic repositories have excluded marginalized and traditionally invisible communities. Our first priority was to purchase available print material; however, because these publications are often self-published or published by small presses, they are rarely available through our normal purchasing avenues, which include the GOBI collection development service and a specially-designed approval plan through Brodart. In collaboration with a PhD candidate at OSU who was studying Native American popular culture, we generated a list of publishers and creators whose work we wanted to acquire and ordered as many of the materials as we could find.

35 Hughes-Watkins, 9.

36 Charlotte Cubbage, “Selection and Popular Culture in Large Academic Libraries: Taking the Temperature of Your Research Community,” in Weiner, *Graphic Novels and Comics in Libraries and Archives*, 75.

One of the challenges we encountered is that much of the work has been published in digital format only, though we are still developing our institutional support for these kinds of materials. We are also sending a representative to Indigenous Comic Con to purchase works that may only be available directly from the creators, and to establish relationships with the community.

Once materials are acquired, we carefully consider the most appropriate subject headings and descriptive metadata to include in the MARC catalog record in order to increase discoverability. As previously noted, the most commonly used schemes are not ideal for indigenous materials. Gilman summarized the situation in 2006: “It is clear that schemes such as DDC [Dewey Decimal Classification], LCC [Library of Congress Classification] and LCSH [Library of Congress Subject Headings] are presently inadequate for the purposes of describing, and providing access to, indigenous materials that do not easily conform to the strictures of Western epistemology and language.”³⁷ The LCSH include general headings for comics, such as “Comic books, strips, etc.” and “Graphic Novels.” More specific headings that could be used for this particular population include “Indigenous peoples in popular culture,” “Indigenous peoples in art,” and “Indigenous peoples—Fiction,” as well as headings identifying specific tribes. We took the additional step of contacting the creators themselves, where possible, to determine if they had a preference for how their work was described. Some indigenous people prefer to be identified by their tribe, clan or language rather than by a general term like “indigenous” or “native.” There are also some who prefer to use the tribe or clan name in their own language, rather than the English-language version. Our guiding principle has been to be as inclusive as possible, because we don’t always know what terms our patrons will use in their searches.

The second phase of this initiative will focus on raising awareness of the materials. In addition to digital tools that will enable discovery, we also plan to host public events and exhibitions, coordinate educational programming (potentially with indigenous creators), and find opportunities to integrate these materials into course curriculum at OSU.

As we continue to develop the collection, and promote engagement with the materials, our third phase will include seeking out original comic artwork and the papers or archives of selected Native American creators, recognizing that in

37 Isaac Gilman, “From Marginalization to Accessibility: Classification of Indigenous Materials” (2006), *Faculty Scholarship (PUL)*, Paper 6, <https://commons.pacificu.edu/libfac/6/>.

some cases a museum, archive, or library that specializes in indigenous or native people's work may be a more appropriate repository. We anticipate that this phase will require long-term relationship building and targeted outreach that may take many years to move forward.

To help advance all of these efforts, the OSU Libraries has created a five-year visiting faculty position, the Mary P. Key Resident for Cultural Diversity Inquiry, to work primarily with the BICLM on this and other diversity projects in order to "more actively support the university's commitments to diversity in people and ideas and reflect the Libraries' efforts to advance diversity in our collections, services, and organizational development."³⁸ Although we are still in the first phase of this initiative, we hope that the end result will be to redress the consequential underrepresentation of comics by indigenous peoples in research libraries and archival collections and to establish our ongoing commitment to building a reparative archive that will be easily discoverable and accessible to researchers.

Immigration: promoting engagement with special collections materials

Immigration, and its impact on the politics, policies, society, and culture of the United States, is an important social justice and civil rights issue, one that has become a particularly heavily debated topic in the past several years with passionate arguments on all sides. The BICLM has three exhibition galleries, two of which feature temporary exhibits that change every six months. We decided to postpone an exhibit about the Vietnam War in order to organize one investigating immigration through the lens of cartoons and comics that have responded to the issue over the past century and a half. The exhibit provided a unique opportunity for us to diversify our holdings, welcome marginalized communities into our space, and to utilize our art and primary sources to contribute to the wider ongoing debate on immigration.

After surveying our collections, we discovered that we had particularly rich holdings in historical American political cartoons and comic strips, but found other gaps that the exhibit would give us an opportunity to address and correct. For example, while we had political cartoons representing various issues throughout history, we lacked recent cartoons, especially from immigrant and underrepresented populations themselves. We identified political cartoonists from margin-

38 Damon Jagers, "University Libraries Selects Mary P. Key Diversity Residents," The Ohio State University: University Libraries, December 12, 2017, <https://library.osu.edu/news/university-libraries-selects-mary-p.-key-diversity-residents>.

alized communities, including cartoonists of color, Latinx, Muslim, and women cartoonists, and asked them to participate in the exhibition. Creators had the option to loan original works temporarily or to donate them so that their cartoons could begin to correct the imbalance in our collections. We were thrilled to receive donations from many of those we reached out to, including Khalil Bendib, a Muslim-American immigrant from Algeria; Lalo Alcaraz, the son of immigrants from Mexico; and Eric Garcia, who writes that through his political art, he attempts to subvert “the various dominant histories of the conquering powers” and tries “to visually examine the versions of ‘American’ history that have been overlooked, white-washed, or flat out deleted.”³⁹ Similarly, although we had a relatively comprehensive collection of immigrant narratives in comic book or graphic novel format, we did not have original art from those works. We reached out to a number of comics artists and received donations from several, including Dr. Alberto Ledesma, author of *Diary of a Reluctant Dreamer: Undocumented Vignettes from a Pre-American Life*, and Lila Quintero Weaver, author of *Darkroom: A Memoir in Black and White*, a comic about immigrating to the U.S. from Argentina during the Civil Rights era.



Figure 1 A wall of contemporary editorial cartoons featured in *Looking Backward, Looking Forward: U.S. Immigration in Cartoons and Comics* exhibit at the Billy Ireland Cartoon Library & Museum. Photo by Justin Luna.

39 “Eric J. Garcia,” Chicago Latino Artchive: A Century of Chicago Latino Art, accessed November 1, 2018, <https://iuplr.uic.edu/iuplr/chicagolatinoartchive/artists-profiles/artist-profile/GarciaEricJ>.

It was important to us to raise awareness about the exhibition among faculty and students at OSU. We identified professors teaching classes related to immigration and invited them to incorporate the exhibition into their curriculum. The response was overwhelmingly positive, and twelve courses from nine different departments utilized the exhibition to explore a wide variety of topics.⁴⁰

The exhibit also provided an opportunity to partner with the Department of Spanish and Portuguese to create a unique educational program for an audience largely new to the BICLM. We combined the opening reception for the exhibition with the Department's annual Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) celebration. In addition to the cartoons and comics on display in our exhibition, we displayed dozens of additional books, magazines, and original art by Latinx creators in our reading room for visitors to discover and browse. Several hundred people attended the event, mostly first-time visitors, allowing us to show new audiences the stories cartoons tell and how they can impact our society and our culture. Separately, we organized a panel discussion with three of the cartoonists featured in the exhibition who had particular connections to immigration and immigrant communities.

The exhibition also inspired researchers and faculty from other institutions to incorporate cartoons in their teaching and scholarship. For example, Professor Nhora Serrano of Hamilton College received a course development grant to conduct research in the exhibit and our collection in order to help her develop a new course focused on immigrants in comics.⁴¹ She also conducted research for a scholarly article on the representation of Latinx characters in popular culture. Ultimately, we plan to adapt the exhibition into digital format so that it can be accessed from anywhere at any time.

40 Courses included Politics of Immigration (Political Science), Social Inequality (Sociology), American Identity in the World (Comparative Studies), Religion and American Culture (Comparative Studies), and Visual Culture: Investigating Diversity and Social Justice (Art Education).

41 See: Amy Chalmers, "Visiting Researcher Spotlight: Nhora Serrano," *Billy Ireland Cartoon Library & Museum Blog*, April 18, 2018, <https://library.osu.edu/blogs/cartoons/2018/04/18/visiting-researcher-spotlight-nhora-serrano/>.

Conclusion and recommendations for future action

Special collections must be intentional and proactive in their collection development policies, management, and engagement in order to be more inclusive and correct past imbalances and erasures. We also advocate for institutions to cooperate in order to identify and fill gaps in current holdings.

Collective Collecting

The Michigan State University Comic Art Collection (est. 1970) and BICLM, two of the earliest institutions to recognize the value of preserving the comic art form, have long worked together through an informal arrangement to cover distinct areas of collecting. This concept of “collective collecting” not only alleviates institutional competition, but also means work is not being duplicated. Both the mass-produced nature and frequent output of comic strips, cartoons, and comic books makes for an impossible amount of material for one institution alone to collect comprehensively.

The concept of institutional collaboration opens up opportunities for critical librarianship. Some special collections and archives might choose to document specific social justice or civil rights movements, or to build a reparative archive of comics and cartoons by (and related to) specific populations. For Example, the South Asian comics collection at University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign holds over twelve hundred volumes from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, and was spearheaded by Mara Thacker after she “realized that nobody [in the United States or India] was really collecting comics from South Asia.”⁴² The University of North Carolina Chapel Hill is collecting in similar essential and under-collected areas with its the Mexican Comic Collection and Latino Comic Books Collection.⁴³

42 “Mara Thacker | Movers & Shakers 2017—Community Builders,” *Library Journal*, March 15, 2017, <https://www.libraryjournal.com/?detailStory=marathacker-movers-shakers-2017-community-builders>. For more on the South Asian comics collection at Illinois, see Thacker’s chapter “Building a South Asian Comics Collection” in this book.

43 See: http://finding-aids.lib.unc.edu/PN6790.M482_M4/ and <http://finding-aids.lib.unc.edu/PN6726.L38/#d1e49>.

The BICLM is now reviewing its collection development policy to address our newer diversity initiatives and also to potentially narrow the scope of our collection efforts. When the library was founded, because so much popular culture material was being lost, the collecting scope included all of print (or still) cartoons and comics. However, with the recent recognition of the importance of preserving popular culture material and more institutions collecting these materials, we can move to a more targeted approach.

Working across institutions through intentional acquisitions, cataloging, and outreach, special collections and archives can advocate for and document the diverse and underrepresented voices in our cultural heritage.

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