

PERSPECTIVE

The Heart of the Matter: The Developmental History of African American Archives

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Abstract

In 1974, F. Gerald Ham cautioned that contemporary diversity efforts were provisional as they emphasized a narrow research focus and failed to incorporate the unexplored history of underrepresented groups. Since that time, there has been a comparative increase in the diversity of collections and the profession as a whole; however, our archival approaches to diversity continue to be uneven because archivists still have not analyzed the historiography of ethnic archives, including those in the African American community. This article examines the developmental history of African American archives, including segregated collection objectives and internalized social hierarchies, and considers the impact of these variables on broader diversity initiatives of the archival profession.

Racial politics in America have a long, complicated—and unfinished—history. Current population statistics indicate a broad range of ethnicities, but a pervasive social hierarchy that contributes to an inequitable distribution of power still exists.¹ American archivists began examining this representative imbalance in documentary records during the 1970s after acknowledging that the circumscriptive nature of traditional appraisal and selection models excluded minority groups.

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¹ It is important to note my distinction between representation and authority. Having a diverse population does not mean that individual ethnic groups are represented equally in terms of administrative power.

Professional passivity, as famously characterized by Howard Zinn, is often cited as the cause of a lack of collection diversity. He describes archivists' adopted neutrality as validation of "the political and economic status quo simply by going about . . . ordinary business."² F. Gerald Ham's criticism focused more on the profession's methods in the 1970s, bringing a practitioner's perspective to his analysis of diversity issues; he cautioned that his peers' apathetic approach to contemporary diversity efforts were only provisional because they failed to incorporate the unexplored history related to these groups and catered to conventional research agendas.³ This critique is still valid today, despite our profession's progress to adopt more inclusive practices.

Archival literature and practice over the last forty years reflect a sustained effort to address diversity concerns proactively. In addition to financial support for professional diversity, such as the Mosaic Scholarship for archival students of color, several modified and emerging procedural methods now focus on fostering collaborative relationships with community groups and increasing collections that more accurately document underrepresented populations.⁴ This progress should be applauded; however, Gerald Ham's caution about a lack of historical understanding still holds merit.

Despite progress in cultivating diversity in our profession and collections, a lack of in-depth analysis of the historiography of the ethnic archives we are targeting remains, including the evolution of self-documentation in the African American community. Instead, we characterize and assess minority collections based on our profession's narrow perspective of diversity objectives, not on the documentation priorities of the originating community that usually have designated social and political purposes. Many diversity initiatives address resource requirements such as funding, work-flow design, and professional development, but assessing material needs is not the same as analyzing the history; whereas resource initiatives focus on procedural means, historical context provides an understanding of why ethnic communities choose to document and represent

² Howard Zinn, *Howard Zinn on History* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2001), 170.

³ F. Gerald Ham, "The Archival Edge," *The American Archivist* 38, no. 1 (1975): 8.

⁴ Though debated in regard to its sustainability, the documentation strategy is an archival method that is repeatedly suggested as a means to incorporate more diversity into collections. The process begins with an expert analysis of the documentary needs of a particular topic, area, or segment of the population. Then, a strategic documentation plan is implemented to accession or create the necessary records. A more recent alternative is the participatory appraisal and arrangement strategy advocated by Katie Shilton and Ramesh Srinivasan in their paper, "Participatory Appraisal and Arrangement for Multicultural Archival Collections," *Archivaria* 63 (2007): 87–101. This strategy collaborates directly with documented groups for the selection, arrangement, and description processes.

themselves as they do and how they would like to adapt these characterizations in the face of changing social dynamics.⁵

The developmental history of African American archives is complex, beginning with segregated documentation methods and objectives. While historical quantitative data provided statistical information, as collected by federal and municipal governing agencies, there was, until recently, a dearth of in-depth, descriptive information about certain areas of social and political development. In addition, a historic social hierarchy exists within the black community, most notably along lines of class, gender, and sexual orientation; this stratification creates prohibitive selection dynamics similar to those in traditional archives. For our profession's diversity initiatives to be successful, we must acknowledge the significance and impact of these social variables on African American historical documentation by addressing the original theoretical substratum of these collections and recognizing internalized prejudices and standards of inclusion.

Developing Early African American History Practices

Archivists began to actively document African Americans in the 1960s during the civil rights movement, the new social history stoking interest in ethnic histories.⁶ However, an established history of documentation and presentation already existed in the African American community; only during the sixties did marginalized and "mainstream" archives begin to converge.

The development of African American history dates back to before the Civil War, when early black intellectuals criticized deliberate omissions and derogatory characterizations in the master narrative.⁷ As a result, early black history objectives specifically addressed historical inaccuracies and ethnic generalizations.⁸ After emancipation, history as a public space remained fiercely contested and restrictively labeled as the social arrangement between blacks and whites shifted, particularly in the South. During this transition, African American history took on a more demonstrative component, often expressed through commemorative exhibitions which included parades and speeches.

⁵ Mark Greene explores this struggle between the "archival paradigm" and the "recordkeeping paradigm" in his article, "The Power of Meaning: The Archival Mission in the Postmodern Age," *The American Archivist* 65, no. 1 (2002): 42–55.

⁶ Dominique Daniel, "Documenting the Immigrant and Ethnic Experience in American Archives," *The American Archivist* 73, no. 1 (2010): 83.

⁷ Benjamin Quarles, *Black Mosaic: Essays in Afro-American History and Historiography* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 109–10.

⁸ John Ernest, "Liberation Historiography: African American Historians before the Civil War," *American Literary History* 14, no. 3 (2002): 417.

The most notable tradition is Emancipation Day, or the Juneteenth Celebration, the annual recognition of Texas's abolition of slavery in 1865 which grew from a regional event to become a more widespread and symbolic commemoration. These types of exercises were a platform for social education and progressive encouragement.

. . . blacks defiantly insisted on the public expression of their memory, and in their robust ceremonial life, blacks most fully revealed their collective historical imagination. . . . Public ceremonies, which became the preeminent forum in which blacks displayed their recalled past, enabled vast numbers of blacks to learn, invent, and practice a common language of memory.⁹

Many of these early demonstrations built on the inherited African American historical method of utilizing overtly positive, iconic imagery and descriptions to celebrate black accomplishments and refute negative stereotypes. As the profession of history was legitimized, these demonstrations fell out of favor, not because of format but content. Developing approaches to African American history retained the mission of education and promotion, but black historians now wanted to archive and disseminate information based on established research instead of perpetuated social myths and exaggerations. This new school of thought conjectured that moving out of the “vagaries of rhetoric and propaganda and become[ing] systematic and scientific” not only validated the content of these programs but also created a sustainable infrastructure of resources that provided education, empowerment, and documented proof that historically racist depictions of African Americans were gross distortions.¹⁰

If a Tree Falls in the Forest . . .

Contemporary diversity initiatives and literature rarely address this early evolution of black history and documentary practices. As John Ernest states, “few seem willing to consider the possibility that African-American historians of the past might have something to say about approaches to African-American history.”¹¹ Instead, black archives are generally categorized in relation to the dearth of resources available in mainstream archives. Thus, much of

⁹ W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *The Southern Past: A Clash of Race and Memory* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), 58–59. These performances were part of a network of established community institutions such as local schools and churches. This instructional strategy was implemented by early black historians such as W. E. B. Du Bois and Carter G. Woodson, founder of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History. Woodson was also instrumental in implementing Negro History Week in segregated schools to promote awareness of the race's history and accomplishments.

¹⁰ Arthur A. Schomburg, “The Negro Digs Up His Past,” in *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. Alain Locke (New York: Touchstone, 1925), 231–32.

¹¹ Ernest, “Liberation Historiography,” 414.

the existing literature pertaining to diversity in archives asserts that because traditional archives' exclusive selection and appraisal practices created inequitable representation in the public cultural record, then the onus of ethical responsibility and means of resolution lie with these same institutions.

Regardless of whether the intent is stewardship or full custodianship, this viewpoint denotes one group supplanting or directing another group. In recognition of the history of independent African American historiography and archival practice, this assumption begs the question: Whose diversity agenda are we following—our profession's or ethnic communities' self-determined criteria? This question might illuminate why several contemporary African American archives are proprietary about their collections: Their organizational missions embody objectives that are not often reflected in conventional archives. For example, HistoryMakers, a nonprofit organization that produces and archives video oral histories, was founded because "Historical research has focused largely on slavery, the Civil Rights movement, music, sports and entertainment. The HistoryMakers' focus is to capture the stories of accomplished African Americans across all walks of life . . ." ¹² However, sustainability issues, such as funding and resources, necessitate collaboration between traditional and ethnic archives, not for empowerment's sake but for economic practicality. So what should collaboration that incorporates authentic diversity objectives look like?

Although not an archives, the University of North Carolina Press's Mellon-funded Long Civil Rights Movement (LCRM) pilot project is a good conceptual model of what archivists should strive for in terms of diversity. A digital publishing pilot, the project examines the history of the American civil rights movement beyond popularly reinforced definitions and icons; it also incorporates early African American activism and lesser-known participants while expanding the scope to encompass contemporary civil rights issues including immigration and gender equality. The final product is a fully representative platform of research resources, the content of which is selected through institutional collaboration.

A similarly holistic and interdisciplinary approach should guide our diversity objectives as selective acquisition of ethnic records to supplement general collections represents an anachronistic placement strategy that disregards original collection objectives and establishes a custodial relationship where one is not necessarily required or appropriate. A fully integrated, multicultural historical record means a diversity agenda that articulates multiple documentary perspectives and delineates the relationship between them, both historic and contemporary. In practice, this would mean following through on the natural development of specific social topics in ethnic communities through collection accessioning or documentation strategies.

¹² HistoryMakers, "About Us," <http://www.thehistorymakers.com/aboutus/>, accessed 15 April 2010.

For example, if a collecting institution would like to focus on African American women, it should not exclude but transcend traditional representations by accessioning materials that help to fully characterize black women, such as documentation about the long-term effect integration had on black feminine identity, the progression of gender relationships within the black community, or the prominent role of black women in broader, mainstream political and social movements. However, to learn about the presence and significance of these topics, traditional collecting institutions should collaborate with these communities to gain historical context and research the communities' historiography to fully understand the complex issues that are being addressed.

Material that is created by members of underrepresented communities offers clues for understanding events that may have been ignored, misunderstood, or misrepresented in traditional sources . . . they provide insights into the diversity of individuals and range of opinions within each community.¹³

Minority within a Minority

To characterize African American archives only in subjugated terms in comparison to mainstream collecting institutions is to continue to ignore the complex power issues in black documentation objectives. In their myriad formats, African American history and archives have endeavored to create a legitimate historical record and protest social prejudice. Thus, the public images presented represent not incidental capture but purposeful construction. Even in the early days of history as exhibition, "Black deportment, in sum, had clear political significance; debates over black fitness fused the issue of participation in public life with questions of individual and collective integrity."¹⁴

The transition from pageantry to traditional historical methods changed the format but not the intent of history and documentation. The first wave of black historians had specific ideas about the structure of racial progress. An elite class of college-educated intellectuals, these early pioneers, such as W. E. B. Du Bois and Carter G. Woodson, believed that black history and education were

¹³ Joan D. Krizack, "Preserving the History of Diversity: One University's Efforts to Make Boston's History More Inclusive," *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Cultural Heritage* 8, no. 2 (2007): 132.

¹⁴ Brundage, *The Southern Past: A Clash of Race and Memory*, 79.

requisite components for racial advancement.¹⁵ This elitism was not only intended to be an applicable model for progress but also empirical proof of the intellectual and social capability of the race, proof to be archived for both remembrance and example.¹⁶ Just as social hierarchy contributed to selective accessioning in traditional collecting repositories, so has an early, internalized social class system created a pattern of selectivity that impacts past and current African American collections. One example is Bayard Rustin, civil rights activist and contemporary of Martin Luther King, Jr. Rustin has only recently been recognized for his contributions to the civil rights movement despite his significance in the development of early civil rights doctrines and practices. He was relegated to obscurity because many of his peers feared his homosexuality would negatively impact the effectiveness of their initiatives:

... Rustin's gay identity outweighed his political savoir faire. In these instances, black civil rights leaders pointedly dismissed him, demanded his resignation from service, or denied him the institutional space to even articulate a civil rights vision. Perhaps no other figure contributed so much to the cause of African-American equality and remains so invisible in history.¹⁷

Thus, we must also recognize that just as the established parties in general society have the opportunity to silence certain voices, that capability exists within the African American community as well.¹⁸

¹⁵ August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, *Black History and the Historical Profession, 1914–1980* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 3. Although Arthur Schomburg was also considered a member of the early middle-class elite, he was a well-known detractor of Du Bois's Talented Tenth philosophy. He subscribed to some elements of the doctrine, but he did not believe that a traditional educational model was the exclusive means to racial progress. In addition, he wanted to document and archive the contributions of nonelite African Americans to social progress and advancement. An excellent analysis of the tension in Schomburg's relationship to both the Talented Tenth philosophy as well as a more democratic perspective to collection development is the chapter, "Arthur Schomburg as Decolonizing Historian," in Kevin Meehan, *People Get Ready: African American and Caribbean Cultural Exchange* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009).

¹⁶ Elisabeth Kaplan explores this topic of using archives to support the social, political, and historical functions of identity in her article, "We Are What We Collect, We Collect What We Are: Archives and Construction of Identity," *The American Archivist* 63 (2000): 126–51.

¹⁷ Devon W. Carbado and Donald Weise, "The Civil Rights Identity of Bayard Rustin," *Texas Law Review* 82, no. 5 (2004): 1135–36.

¹⁸ One independent project that attempted to discover and preserve documents and records on African American gays and lesbians is the Black Gay and Lesbian Archive Project. The mission statement notes that one reason the archives was founded was because "Undocumented by many research and archival institutions in the United States, the historical contributions of non-heterosexual people of African descent has gone largely unnoticed." Steven G. Fullwood, "A Black LGBT/SGL/Q/Q/IntheLife Archive: Why Now?," Black Gay and Lesbian Archive Project. The collection was donated to the Schomburg Center for Black Research in 2004. The original BGLA website has recently been removed but limited information is still available at <http://www.stevengfullwood.org/>, accessed 17 February 2012.

Talented Tenth

In even more subtle ways, old patterns of social stratification affect contemporary diversity initiatives. Several recent projects have focused on supporting unique collections in historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) by providing professional development and resources for preservation and archival needs. The value of this assistance and the unique contribution of these materials are not in dispute. However, it should be noted that HBCUs' documentary materials on the African American experience are historically representative of a particular class and perspective: blacks who could afford a college education and/or aspired to achieve the social and economic benefits of higher education and middle-class status. HBCU collections do contribute to diversity in a larger sense; however, excluding regional significance, these documents inadvertently represent a selective perspective.

Even within the genre of HBCU collections, this class stratification has an impact. One example is Cornell University Library's collaborative digital initiative with the HBCU Library Alliance to provide professional development to archivists and special collections librarians at historically black institutions. Of the twenty-two schools associated with the project, ten have been ranked academically in the top twenty-five by *U.S. News and World Report*.¹⁹ Seven are listed in the top ten historically black institutions with the highest endowments.²⁰ In addition, only one of the twelve private schools had tuition costs lower than \$15,000, with the highest being over \$20,000. Of the public schools, only one out of ten had a tuition rate lower than \$10,000.²¹

Many of the project's participants represent a very specific demographic of HBCUs: those with a long history of academic prestige and financial legacy. A committed financial contribution is necessary for the sustainability of any digital project, and relatively established collections from underrepresented groups

¹⁹ U.S. News and World Report Education, "Historically Black Colleges and Universities Ranking," <http://colleges.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-colleges/hbcu-rankings/>, accessed 14 April 2010.

²⁰ Diverse, "News," Ronald Taylor, "Endowments: Investing in Education's Future—Historically African American Colleges" (17 June 2007), http://diverseeducation.com/artman/publish/article_7518.shtml, accessed 14 April 2010.

²¹ U.S. News and World Report Education, "Historically Black Colleges and Universities Ranking." Public and private status were determined using Univsource, "Historically Black Colleges and Universities in the United States of America," <http://www.univsource.com/hbcu.htm>, accessed 17 February 2012. Comparatively, HBCU tuition rates are generally lower than historically white colleges. Notation of participating institutions' tuition rates and endowments is not meant to belittle the fact that, like most academic institutions, HBCUs are contending with financial cutbacks and staff reductions. In addition, the 2007 final report of the HBCU-CUL digital initiative recognized the disparity and explicitly states that "The eventual goal of the HBCU Library Alliance is to enable all HBCUs to participate in a HBCU Digital Library." Cornell University Library, "Final Report to the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation on *Building Collections, Building Services, and Building Sustainability: A Collaborative Model for the HBCU Library Alliance*" (September 2007), HBCU-CUL Digitization Initiative, HBCU Library Alliance, http://www.hbculibraries.org/docs/Final_report.pdf, accessed 14 April 2010.

are just as necessary in the path toward equal representation in a larger context. However, as archivists, we have a responsibility to be aware of factors such as class and power within ethnic communities; these factors can inadvertently hinder comprehensive and accurate documentation by promoting more familiar institutions and social perspectives instead of recognizing comparatively obscure ones.²²

Conclusion

In the four decades archivists have been working to develop a cohesive diversity agenda, the focus has shifted from apolitical neutrality to active engagement. However, the lack of investigation into the historiographies behind communities' self-documentation practices affects the profession's goal of actualizing collection diversity. In addition, by frequently delineating black collections in terms of resource paucity or as a necessary appendix yet to be cultivated in established archives, we ignore that, in the face of segregation, African Americans developed their own structural philosophy to build historical resources. This strategic move toward political empowerment was, as with any political dynamic, socially stratified in terms of power and class. Thus, many early historically black collections not only document the steady social advancement of the race but also include the purposeful silence of alternative voices and perspectives. In addition, early social attempts to emulate mainstream class systems made some institutions more recognizable and better prepared for collaboration with mainstream institutions, leaving those less equipped to struggle with preserving their unique but potentially anonymous legacies.

Incorporating diversity into the historical record does not mean blindly accessioning records related to a specific race or ethnicity. Just as we recognize and encourage divergence in mainstream archives that document a broad range of professional fields and perspectives, we must see ethnic communities as independent, complex social groups instead of presuming that our diversity agenda is in alignment with minority documentary needs and histories simply because it addresses the issue of diversity.

If we as archivists have been slow to question our profession's long held view of archives and archival records as sites of historical truth, we have been equally slow to question assumptions about group and individual identity as representations of historical truth or reality.²³

²² The best way to begin addressing these issues is with research. A starting point for HBCUs might be an investigation into what happens to these unique collections at closing schools and whether there are contingency plans to preserve the historical significance of the records along with their material format.

²³ Kaplan, "We Are What We Collect": 144–45.

To develop authentic, sustainable, and meaningful initiatives, we must set aside our assumptions, examine the diversity *within* diverse groups, and modify our objectives to incorporate the full range of perspectives available within these respective communities. Diverse and comprehensive representation in different types of collections is a luxury taken for granted by the social majority represented in mainstream archives; it is a right that should be afforded to the groups to which we, as a profession, aspire to give a broader voice.

Yet, the aim of this perspective is not to advocate for systemic endorsement of a radically modified diversity agenda but, rather, it is to initiate a discussion about how to make our diversity initiatives more authentic and meaningful. For example, we might begin with comparative assessment projects that crosswalk collection objectives with community needs and cultural identity, as well as appraising institutional resources and identifying potential areas of symbiotic collaboration. This type of evaluation could help to facilitate compatibility between our diversity goals and individual ethnic communities' archival missions. Another strategy would be to modify established and emerging cooperative methods not just to articulate original documentary roles but also to address associated social parameters, both explicit and embedded. Ultimately, any strategy will prove to be involved and exhaustive because it entails developing a foundation of applicable procedures, principles, and models where none existed before. However, the prospect is not wholly untenable and is, ultimately, worthwhile as increased understanding of ethnic communities' archival motivations will better inform our profession's role in developing a more accurate cultural record.