

thetic audiences. This resistance should not be framed as the fault of the student. In *Teaching About Race and Racism in the College Classroom*, Cyndi Kernahan offered,

... many Americans (especially Whites, but not only Whites) believe in the notion of colorblindness, rejecting the notion of widespread institutional discrimination. Similarly, there is little understanding of our history and the racist ideas that shaped the United States from the beginning. ... Given this, it is not surprising that our students struggle to make sense of what we are teaching them and that they slip back just as we push forward.<sup>92</sup>

Educating students about issues of race is reflective of threshold learning concepts in that, "... learning about race involves seeing oneself in a new way and in a way that can be hard to 'unsee.'"<sup>93</sup> Though taking on this subject matter in library instruction may prove challenging, it is critical to engage students in these fundamental issues—they govern the worlds in which students live and learn.

Artists' books have the potential to break difficult conceptual barriers and facilitate meaningful engagement with the material in its social, cultural, political, and art historical contexts. Kara Walker's *Freedom: a Fable* can challenge and inspire students toward similarly rigorous critical engagement. The book's richness, resonance, and complexity may productively discomfit students and encourage self-reflective and responsive scholarly practice.

---

## The Necessity of Embracing Collection Gaps: Moving Towards Diverse, Equitable, and Inclusive Collecting

by Ruth Kramer

Many special collections and rare book departments within American academic libraries are changing their collection development policies to reflect the need and call for diverse collections. However, many of these altered policies do not adequately address what a diverse collection is, and how to achieve this. Moreover, while institutions look to diversify their collections, they are also filling "collection gaps," or, acquiring items in areas of weakness, to better strengthen the overall research and instruction value of the entire collection. To better understand these policy changes, we can look at a variety of academic institutions that differ in size, geographic location,

---

92. Cyndi Kernahan. *Teaching about Race and Racism in the College Classroom: Notes from a White Professor* (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2019), 48.

93. Kernahan, 49.

and collection priorities. We must begin by investigating what constitutes a diverse collection in these locations, and how many genuine efforts towards diverse collection acquisitions have failed, by looking solely to acquire items of identity-based trauma.

A “collection gap” refers to a lack of materials in relation to a specific theme, event, or historical idea at an institution. Many institutions identify these gaps, or weaknesses, in their collection development policies. At the University of Virginia, the collection development policy stated:

[W]e address imbalances in our collections. Despite our success in building a collection with nationally and internationally recognized strengths, our holdings remain imbalanced in significant ways. . . . It is a high priority to address these imbalances by collecting creatively and proactively.<sup>94</sup>

At Smith College, the College Archives Collection Development Policy read:

The College Archives has a strong base of materials documenting traditional white, heteronormative stories centering on Smith’s policies, teaching, and activities. The College Archives recognizes the gaps this collection strategy produced, and seeks now to expand the story of Smith College to include the College’s multi-faceted, and varied communities.”<sup>95</sup>

A collection gap can concern any subject, but it has become increasingly apparent that the gaps at academic libraries most often concern materials created in, by, or about historically excluded and marginalized groups, including Black, Indigenous, and additional communities of color, LGBTQ+ individuals, women, and disabled persons. Due to these gaps, many institutions’ collection development policies explicitly state that they look to collect materials representative of “underrepresented networks,”<sup>96</sup> or “traditionally marginalized and/or non-canonical voices and cultures,”<sup>97</sup> or the “archives of traditionally underrepresented individuals and groups.”<sup>98</sup> Though these are academic libraries, all differ in who and how they seek to

94. “Special Collections: Collection Development Strategy | UVA Library.” University of Virginia. 2023. <https://www.library.virginia.edu/special-collections/collections/collection-development-policy#:~:text=We%20avoid%20replicating%20the%20research,every%20part%20of%20our%20operation.https://libraries.smith.edu/special-collections/about/collection-development-strategy>.

95. “Collection Development Strategy, Smith College Special Collections.” Smith College. 2019. <https://libraries.smith.edu/special-collections/about/collection-development-strategy>.

96. “Collection Development Policy.” Special Collections, Williams College. 2023. <https://specialcollections.williams.edu/collection-development-policies/>.

97. Indiana University Libraries. “Moving The Center In Library Collections: Principles And Actions For IUB Libraries.” Indiana University. September 12, 2022. <https://libraries.indiana.edu/moving-center-library-collections>.

98. “Special Collections Collection Development Policy - University Libraries | Washington University In St. Louis.” University Libraries - Washington University In St. Louis. May 2022. <https://library.wustl.edu/about/policies/spec-collection-development-policy/>.

serve, even while each is looking for “diverse” collections.

To further contextualize these changes in collection development nationwide, we must also look at why these changes are occurring only now, rather than earlier. The library profession is overwhelmingly and dominantly white at 82%.<sup>99</sup> Not even thirty years ago, 96% of the Rare Books and Manuscript Section (RBMS) of the American Library Association (ALA) identified as white.<sup>100</sup> Beyond this contemporary domination, white supremacy and exclusivity defined many library histories; David James Hudson argued there is little space left for genuine engagement due to “diversity’s preoccupation with demographic inclusion and individual behavioral competence,”<sup>101</sup> and Isabel Espinal emphasized the negative impacts of centered whiteness in librarianship, stating “adherence to whiteness in libraries has had deleterious affective and career implications for librarians of color.”<sup>102</sup> It would be incorrect to think this does not inform previous and ongoing acquisition decisions, in regards to what we collect and prioritize, but also what collections are about and whose voices are a part of them. White supremacy demands the silence, erasure, and suffering of marginalized people, something from which libraries, museums, and academic institutions are not immune, and to which they have actively contributed.<sup>103</sup>

The experiences and voices of people of color, of LGBTQ+ individuals, of disabled persons, and so on, were not only dismissed from widely accepted understandings of American history, but also actively silenced. Author Kellee E. Warren criticized, “calls for diversity and minority participation in library and information science and archival science”<sup>104</sup> by aligning the lack of Black women’s presence in the field with the misrepresentation, or complete lack of representation, of Black women throughout history. Warren posed: “if Black women are not recognized as worthwhile subjects in the archives, and presently not valued as knowers, how can they be accepted as library and archive professionals?”<sup>105</sup> Warren cited how representations of Black women in

99. “Library Professionals: Facts, Figures, And Union Membership — Department For Professional Employees, AFL-CIO.” Department For Professional Employees. April 16, 2023. <https://www.dpeaflcio.org/factsheets/library-professionals-facts-and-figures>.

100. Grob, Julie. “RBMS, Special Collections, and the Challenge of Diversity: The Road to the Diversity Action Plan.” *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Cultural Heritage* 4, no. 2 (2003): 74-107, <https://rbm.acrl.org/index.php/rbm/article/view/219>.

101. David James Hudson, “On ‘Diversity’ as Anti-Racism in Library and Information Studies: A Critique.” *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 1, no. 1 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.24242/jclis.v1i1.6>.

102. Isabel Espinal, Tonia Sutherland, and Charlotte Roh. “A Holistic Approach for Inclusive Librarianship: Decentering Whiteness in Our Profession,” *Library Trends* 67, no. 1 (2018): 147–162, <https://doi.org/10.1353/lib.2018.0030>.

103. Daryl Fischer, Swarupa Anila, and Porchia Moore, “Coming Together to Address Systemic Racism in Museums,” *Curator* 60 (2017): 23–31, <https://doi.org/10.1111/cura.12191>

104. Kellee E. Warren, “We Need These Bodies, But Not Their Knowledge: Black Women in the Archival Science Professions and Their Connection to the Archives of Enslaved Black Women in the French Antilles,” *Library Trends* 64 no. 4 (2016): 776–794, *Project MUSE*, <https://doi.org/10.1353/lib.2016.0012>.

105. Warren, “We Need,” 776.

history have been “often neglected or destroyed,” and how this continues to harm Black women’s presence in the archives today:

the archives of enslaved Black people are a collection of bodies as numbers, violence and death. As a result, Black women as archivists would be speaking back, or resisting, the official narrative and taking part in shaping their own identities.<sup>106</sup>

Warren’s conclusion encouraged the question, “how can archives, which have historically suppressed records, now convince Black women to join and stay in the profession?”<sup>107</sup> Similarly, how can archivists and librarians work to end barriers of entry, distrust of the profession and of industry professionals, and faulty attempts of increasing diversity?

This is not to say that academic libraries should not look to be more representative of lived human experience, but, in the desire to be more representative of these experiences, I recommend two collection processes to prioritize in acquisition: collect items that do not mainly concern a group’s collective trauma, and acquire materials that showcase the variety of experiences within a group, rather than reducing people to a monolith. For example, claiming a diverse collection of LGBTQ+ experiences would mean that acquiring materials solely relating to HIV/AIDS epidemic (collective trauma), or the experiences of cisgender gay white men (monolithic experience) would be inaccurate, and wrong; the importance of LGBTQ+ histories does not begin and end with epidemic nor with the experiences of a single demographic. One must include multiple dimensions of experiences—creative expressions, voices, and, perhaps most importantly, the joy of individuals and their communities. When we reduce people and communities to the trauma and suffering they and their ancestors have endured, or to a single identity, we reduce their personhood, especially within the historical record.

What I argue instead, is that it is better to embrace collection gaps and be transparent about why they exist, rather than to fill them with materials rooted solely or primarily in identity-based trauma. It is better to be truthful about our gaps and why they are there, than to fill them with resources that do not reflect commitments to and values of academic development, advocacy and dismantlement of oppressive structures, or of intellectual joy. Academic libraries can look inward for work that can be done in or around our institutions. Possibilities include using funds for: student research opportunities relating to institutional histories; honoraria for scholars willing to share their knowledge of institutional, land, or community histories; or for transportation expenses of local patrons, alumni, and other community members who will provide

106. Warren, “We Need,” 777.

107. Warren, “We Need,” 792.

oral histories. And if our acquisition budgets must remain solely in purchasing acquisitions, then, perhaps, progress looks like fewer purchases, with regard for the totality of experience, not just the trauma or single elements of it.

Embracing and addressing our collection gaps, as well as the transparency and commitments to justice they require, is key to developing not only diverse collections, but also equitable and inclusive ones. Libraries, museums, and academic institutions are places of advocacy, in addition to learning. Our professional standards and ethics urge us to not be neutral, and to advance justice through our work:

Archivists collectively seek to document and preserve the record of the broadest possible range of individuals, communities, governance, and organizations. . . . It is not enough to collect the history of diverse peoples—the archives profession must constantly work towards creating anti-oppressive environments that encourage participation from people across the spectrum of experience.<sup>108</sup>

The overarching institutions of academic libraries and special collections actively voice their dedications to tenets of diversity, equity, and inclusion, in addition to advocacy and justice. In Fall 2020, at the University of Virginia, “the University’s Board of Visitors (BOV) endorsed long-term goals tied to specific actions to advance racial equity.”<sup>109</sup> In Williams College’s Strategic Plan of 2021, the College outlined its commitment to “substantially increasing commitments to Sustainability and to Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility as fundamental societal challenges,” and further stated that this will be made possible by “transforming values into shared commitments by weaving them throughout all aspects of the college’s program and operations.”<sup>110</sup> With this in mind, it can be argued that our archives and special collections departments should illustrate collection diversity and strength, but institutional commitments to equity and justice must permeate all aspects of academic and extra-curricular life. These efforts ask for work in the archives that not only meets professional standards of excellence, but also demonstrates commitments to justice and integrity. One cannot exist without the other. We should not be collecting additional identity-based trauma for the sake of cost or status, when our institutional histories still beg to be addressed. There is much learning to be done where we all stand.

---

108. “SAA Core Values Statement And Code Of Ethics | Society Of American Archivists.” Society of American Archivists. August 2020. <https://www2.archivists.org/statements/saa-core-values-statement-and-code-of-ethics>.

109. “Racial Equity | Division For Diversity, Equity, And Inclusion.” University of Virginia. 2020. <https://dei.virginia.edu/racial-equity>.

110. “Williams College Strategic Plan.” Office Of The President. 2021. <https://president.williams.edu/strategic-plan-2021/>.