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Sustainably Critical Cataloging: Maximizing the Impact of Term Funding with the Black Bibliography Project[1]

In a political and funding climate increasingly hostile to DEI initiatives in academic institutions, private or external funding may offer important, though time-bound pathways for institutional change. As an academic project housed in special collections libraries and funded largely through private grants, the Black Bibliography Project (BBP) offers a case study in leveraging term-based project funding to embed lasting critical cataloging practices into technical services workflows. This essay outlines four strategies employed by BBP project staff to ensure that the valuable DEI considerations shaping special collections metadata creation and stewardship within the project extend beyond the confines of the project staff and grant duration: 1. expanding criteria for performing authority work; 2. prioritizing collections within a processing backlog; 3. proposing and conducting large-scale reviews of existing catalog records; and 4. convening communities of practice around metadata remediation events. Together, these strategies serve to maximize the value of grant-funded projects to library staff and users, while minimizing barriers raised by institutional politics.

Introduction

In 2023, I began a role cataloging special collections at Yale's Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library (Beinecke). This role was designed to provide metadata support for the Black Bibliography Project (BBP), as well as to act as a bridge between the academic imperatives of the project and the ongoing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives taking place within University Special Collections. The BBP, like many digital humanities projects in academic library/archive environments, is largely funded by an external grant and bounded by the duration of that funding, for which

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1.   A version of this article was presented by the author, under the title, "Cascading CritCat: a Case Study in Using Term-Based Projects to Advocate for Broader DEIA Work," as part of the Power of New Voices (PONV) session at the RBMS 2024 conference. PONV is an annual conference session featuring the work of early-career individuals, defined as five years post-Master's. Panelists were contacted to submit essays to *RBM*. Essays reflect the brevity of the lightning talk format.

there is always a planned end.[2] From the perspective of the institutional units housing the project, whose overhead costs may only temporarily be aided by grant funding, the projects would ideally also integrate with the long-term workflows of the institution, honing staff instincts and catalyzing institutional change to achieve maximum value from the project. In this paper, I use examples from my experience in this hybrid role with the BBP to illustrate methods of leveraging the momentum of grant-funded projects to advocate for lasting changes in cataloging workflows that prioritize reparative description and metadata remediation beyond a grant's duration.

The BBP is a digital humanities project headed by Drs. Jacqueline Goldsby and Meredith McGill, funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.[3] The BBP uses linked data to create a mode of descriptive bibliography that is built specifically for describing Black print culture.[4] This mission asks us to imagine what current metadata practices might look like if they privileged formats with more collective modes of authorship and production, such as anthologies and serials, over the monograph. It also addresses the need to increase the visibility of Black creators and print workers and to center their agency in bibliographic description, even when white interlocutors may have traditionally been the main entry or primary access point for bibliographic works in library catalogs.[5] Viewing the bibliographic demands of these academic interventions alongside the goals of my cataloging unit, which include a mandate for DEI work, I looked for sites of potential synergy between the workflows. I identified four main strategies for integrating reparative description practices in my cataloging unit: 1. expanding criteria for performing authority work; 2. prioritizing collections within a processing backlog; 3. proposing and conducting large-scale reviews of existing catalog records; and 4. convening communities of practice around metadata remediation events.

1. Expanding Criteria for Performing Authority Work

Typical workflows for special collections catalogers in my unit involve occasional creation of authority records as part of the Name Authority Cooperative Program (NACO) of the Program for Cooperative Cataloging (PCC). These records provide unique identifiers for bibliographic identities that can be used cooperatively by libraries and other institutions. They establish how names should appear in interoperable catalogs, disambiguate between entities with similar names, and link related bibliographic identities and variant forms. Fundamentally, authority records increase the

2.   Jessica Otis, "'Follow the Money?': Funding and Digital Sustainability" *Digital Humanities Quarterly* 17, no. 1 (2023), 4–5.

3.   For more information on the goals and processes of the Black Bibliography Project, see the project website: http://blackbibliog.org

4.   Jacqueline Goldsby and Meredith L. McGill, "What is 'Black' About Black Bibliography?" *The Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* 116, no. 2 (2022), 164–165.

5.   Brenna Bychowski and Melissa Barton, "Modeling Black Literature: Behind the Screen with the Black Bibliography Project" in *Ethnic Studies in Academic and Research Libraries*, eds. Raymond Pun, Melissa Cardenas-Dow, and Kenya S. Flash. (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2021), 229–230.

visibility of an agent's presence in a library catalog by allowing catalog users to group all works related to that agent's unique name together in a single search.

Authority record creation can be time-consuming, and institutions may limit when authority records must be created for agents in typical cataloging workflows. In practice, names recorded in the contributor fields (i.e., 7xx fields that house access points for secondary authors, illustrators, printers, publishers, booksellers, binders, translators, etc.) or in local fields that contain metadata about provenance (e.g., prior ownership, annotation, custodial history, etc.) are often de-prioritized. This reinforces the primacy of the single author within bibliographic description, a bibliographic paradigm that the rich traditions of anthology editing, serial publishing, and collective creation within Black print culture all challenge.[6]

Because BBP workflows sit outside those for typical cataloging in my unit, and because guidelines around what sort of authority work is "necessary" in a linked data system are still nascent, NACO work conducted on behalf of the BBP exceeds typical institutional guidance on staff time. Name Authority Records in the BBP are justified by the project's need to create bibliographic visibility for all creators in the described works. Additionally, its linked data ontology requires that each agent in the BBP knowledge graph be represented uniquely by numerical identifiers, a system bolstered by linkage to external identifiers, such as NACO name authority records or Wikidata items.[7]

Re-imagining criteria for authority work in this way helps to establish authority records as an important part of institutional bibliographical stewardship processes, even when the agents described fall outside of narrow criteria. By increasing Black creators' discoverability in catalogs, finding aids, and linked data systems, BBP staff time on authority work produces a lasting benefit to all institutions relying on those authorities. This expansive consideration of benefit can inform institutional discussions about what authority work is owed to agents, especially to those from communities underrepresented in the Name Authority File and in library description more broadly.

2. Prioritizing Collections Within a Backlog

Priority processing of backlog collections capitalizes on the temporary fungibility of workflows engendered by time-bound projects. At institutions where catalogers work on material queued in a backlog, user demand can alter the order in which collections are cataloged and processed can be altered. Simply, the BBP relies on the availability of Black literature in reading rooms; this reliance demonstrates a user-focused need for prioritized processing of Black materials. When the BBP decided to focus on prison

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6. Elizabeth McHenry, *To Make Negro Literature: Writing, Literary Practice, and African American Authorship* (Duke University Press, 2021), 12.
7. Bychowski and Barton, "Modeling Black Literature," 228.

writing, fellows needed access to a collection of uncatalogued prison periodicals in Beinecke's backlog. Substantiating user demand for this collection, BBP's needs justified prioritizing this material, and in doing so, made this material available to all users more quickly. To the extent that institutional policies allow cataloging queue flexibility, immediate project needs provide a compelling case for re-allocation of labor to process collections. Additionally, to the extent that they make their own prioritization decisions, centering user demand for Black books can help catalogers to critically structure individual workflows. Ideally, these temporary restructurings create new habits and criteria for future prioritization decisions at both a unit and cataloger level.

3. Large-scale Review of Existing Catalog Records

Under-described catalogued collections face a different set of challenges, with limited staff hours and new materials awaiting description. Short-term projects focused on subsets of a library's collection provide rare opportunities to get a holistic view of materials and metadata within that pool. This is a great vantage point from which to spot problems and to advocate for large-scale, retrospective changes. Short-term projects can demonstrate a clear user community with a documented interest in the metadata at hand. If the metadata falls short of current descriptive standards, it demonstrates the same need for metadata work as project-based user interest has for collections access.

BBP, for example, describes materials in the James Weldon Johnson Memorial collection, a large collection of African American literature at Beinecke. Established in 1941, the James Weldon Johnson Memorial collection contains materials catalogued prior to the library's move to digital cataloging.[8] Historically, provenance information, recorded separately from most bibliographic information, was not paired with main catalog cards upon digitization. Digital catalog records, therefore, do not always bear provenance information of the items described. I spotted this pattern during a review of the collection as source material for the BBP. I then engaged with collection curators to propose large-scale review of thousands of items which would restore provenance information to the record, which benefits users interested in Black book history. The project, undertaken by multiple unit catalogers, will extend beyond the duration of the grant and expand the critical approach to description beyond staff immediately connected to the BBP. While the intermittent absence of provenance information affects many records from this transitional period, catalogers can thoughtfully choose which collections to begin remediation efforts with. Projects of this scale require significant institutional support and cannot easily be undertaken in guerilla fashion, but short-term project staff are well-positioned to advocate for them in a data-driven and compelling way, or else to strategically select their starting point.

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8. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, "James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection," http://beinecke.library.yale.edu/collections/curatorial-areas/james-weldon-johnson-memorial-collection

4. Communities of Practice

Finally, short-term projects create opportunities to gather people already doing similar work at or across institutions. The project itself creates cohorts who deepen not only their knowledge of Black print culture, but also interdisciplinary connections amongst scholars, faculty, and staff engaged in reparative bibliographic work. This inherent community-building function is further enhanced through sponsoring additional metadata events. In January 2024, the BBP hosted a Wikidata edit-a-thon, structured as both workshop on Wikidata creation, and a discussion of ethical imperatives that go into describing agents, resources, and communities. With guidance, participants created Wikidata items for Black creators with biographical information that would enhance the BBP database. Attendees included staff and faculty involved in reparative metadata work, including many members of Special Collections Technical Services looking for actionable ways to embed DEI ideals into their daily work. Graduate and undergraduate students interested in digital humanities and bibliography also attended, providing an opportunity to shape the weight they give to descriptive practices in their own academic and professional futures. By convening metadata workers and users for a DEI-focused event, the edit-a-thon served as a networking site for the university community interested in reparative metadata work.[9] Connections built through gatherings of this nature help to break down knowledge silos inherent to short-term projects. In this way, BBP can serve as a point of entry for broader institutional discussions about ethical description that have potential to extend far beyond the boundaries of the actual project.

Conclusions

At the time of writing, the BBP, still funded by its implementation grant, has not yet actualized all its potential for institutional change. Though future strategies may emerge, the four outlined in this article already helped to wring every drop of transformative value from short-term funding. Since the beginning of the current grant in 2023, BBP staff created or critically updated over one hundred Name Authority Cooperative Program (NACO) records, priority-cataloged two large print collections, proposed large-scale review of catalog records of the James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection, and hosted five public Wikidata editing events. These successes positively impacted staff and user communities beyond those initially imagined by the grant.

These strategies, however, have many potential limitations. Fundamentally, my ability to experiment with these strategies reflects a privileged position at a large and well-funded private institution with a publicly stated commitment to DEI work. While both the grant and my institutional position are privately funded, the BBP remains, at the time of writing, relatively shielded from political headwinds that affect public

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9. Jeania Ree Moore, "Reflection on the First BBP Wikidata Edit-a-thon," *Field Notes from the Archive*, February 2024, https://blackbibliog.org/field-notes-from-the-archive-field-note-no-3

funding and institutions. However, with the rise of both anti-library[10] and anti-diversity legislation targeting academic and cultural institutions at both the state[11] and federal levels,[12] advocating for and funding reparative work can require careful maneuvering. Increasingly, library workers committed to inclusive description and stewardship practices find it necessary to do the work without naming the work, a state which makes advocacy for resource allocation inestimably more challenging.

Even in institutions publicly committed to supporting diverse collections, the strategies outlined here require significant institutional resource allocation. Already a gamble in terms of rate of return for labor put into applications,[13] grants from institutions looking to support DEI work may become increasingly scarce and more competitive in a hostile political climate. When a project is fully grant-funded, capitalizing on its reparative long-term potential, as outlined, still requires time, as well as the focus of staff, who are often underpaid, overworked, and too limited in number to experiment. Relatedly, the hire of short-term project staff is often bound by grant funding duration and, even when that staff can make individual changes, expertise and momentum moves with them to their next role, rather than accumulating in any one repository and/or growing through continuous attention. Legislative hostility comes not only in the form of laws that explicitly prevent thoughtful stewardship of diverse materials, but also in the form of federal and state budgets that strip knowledge institutions of the labor and resources required to perform and sustain remediation and community work.

This case study offers a path for thinking creatively about short-term projects as catalysts for user-substantiated change within even reluctant institutions. Not only does external grant funding provide some institutional cover for devoting resources to the enhanced description of un- or under-described communities, but the short-term projects themselves can generate and substantiate user interest in specific collections that justify increased attention to the descriptive practices used therein, without overtly triggering political booby traps. The temporary restructuring of cataloging workflows can allow staff time and mental bandwidth to prioritize authorities and collections of un- or under-described communities, to perform re-description and remediation work as necessary, and to convene communities of practice. These careful and attentive workflows, which can be boosted by a grant's seed funding and disseminated by the practices and programs of a short-term project, must be nurtured into sustainable practice that empowers cataloging staff to see themselves as long-term stewards of diverse and inclusive collections.

10.   American Library Association, "Adverse Legislation in the States," December 21, 2024, https://www.ala.org/advocacy/adverse-legislation-states

11.   Stephanie Birch et al., "On Defense: Academic Librarians in DEI Battleground States," *Journal of Library Outreach and Engagement* 4, no. 1 (2024), 105, https://doi.org/10.21900/j.jloe.v4.1650.

12.   United States Department of Education, "U.S. Department of Education Directs Schools to End Racial Preferences," news release, February 15, 2025, https://www.ed.gov/about/news/press-release/us-department-of-education-directs-schools-end-racial-preferences

13.   Otis, "Follow the Money," 4.