Developing Methods to Address Systemic Collection Bias

DAKOTA COTTON and LAKEN SMITH

Abstract: This report constitutes an actively developing case study in practical methods for realigning the activities of small cultural institutions with the goal of increasing transparency and representing a more complete historical record. Based at historically white institutions in a region which has in the past been a center of white supremacist activity, we are attempting to realign practices to address structural legacies of classist and racist bias surviving throughout historic collections.

In order to work towards a culture of respect and a structure of representation it is necessary to acknowledge the systemic biases against marginalized people. Of particular focus is the impact these existing structures have had on the treatment of historical materials relating to people of color as well as the unique experience of black Americans in the Southern United States within this historical discourse. Vital to this effort is the inclusion of community members to inform, counsel, and shape the development of institutional archival policies and activities. By engaging with the local community and partner cultural heritage institutions in collaborative assessment of the current archival record, we hope to create a path towards active amelioration of the systemic exclusion of the histories of people of color.

This study will describe and attempt to assess active methods being applied to address these issues, including: transparent policy restructuring to increase representation, proactive planning aligned with institutional goals, building awareness and trust through outreach and marketing strategies, as well as the obstacles and challenges faced in the implementation of these efforts.

About the Authors:

Dakota Cotton is the university archivist and reference librarian at Athens State University in northern Alabama. A graduate of the University of Colorado at Boulder's undergraduate history and sociology programs, she completed an MLIS in 2017 from Kent State University. Beginning as a work-study student in the preservation department at CU Boulder's Norlin library, she has since had experience at the City of Phoenix, Arizona's public library system, the Arizona Heritage Center, and is currently an active volunteer for the Huntsville- Madison County Historical Society's educational resource outreach program. Her professional interests include history of technological and scientific development, whitewashing and selective history, mid-century preservation, and public outreach.

Laken Smith holds an undergraduate degree in English literature from the University of Tennessee at Martin and will be a winter 2018 graduate of the University of Alabama's MLIS program. She is currently the graduate intern at the Athens State Archives and has experience at the Giles County Public Library and the Paul Meek Library at UT Martin. In addition to her library experience she is a Head Start teacher and is actively involved with the Giles County Historical Society. Her professional interests include African-American history, silences and counter narratives within the historical record, outreach through archival work, and the evolving public role of libraries.