Representing the Under-Represented: Opportunities for Archival Students in Minority and Ethnic Collections

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In my last year as an M.A. archival studies student in 2010, I was working as a graduate assistant for a couple of undergraduate classes in African-American history. I remember being struck by undergraduates’ and my fellow archival studies students’ lack of awareness as to the availability and existence of archival collections and materials representing minorities and various ethnicities in the Midwest. Showing undergraduates copies of African-American archival materials both surprised and engaged the students’ imaginations. I was asked why there were not more archival materials on minorities made available for research. Their questions rang in my head as a then-future archivist: Where were all the minority and ethnic archival collections?

I was even more struck by something one of my professors, Dr. Barbara Green, said in a graduate course on African-American primary documents: “The generation of African-American historians and those with the community historical knowledge to maintain African-American archival materials is fading.” Spoken by a woman whose father worked alongside Dr. Martin Luther King, this admonition to my class of 12 Caucasian public history students that we should consider specializing in African-American archives both surprised and saddened me. I was unaware that not only were minority and ethnic archival collections scarce, but so were archivists specializing in these areas. Dr. Green’s concern that there should be archivists with the training and passion to maintain and make available such vital historical records gave me an enduring awareness and passion for these under-represented communities.

As I researched the contributions of African Americans to state government and politics throughout the state of Kentucky in 2011, I saw the reality of Dr. Green’s warning, as time-and-again, archival institutions, including those with long-standing ties to the black higher education movement, noted a lack of holdings in minority and ethnic collections, as well as a lack of general knowledge about such communities in the archives’ collecting regions. When I was in the South a few years ago, I became acquainted with archivists in African-American communities and small institutions with little formal archival training but with expertise in civil rights history. Their passion kept their community’s cultural heritage alive, but they noted to me that they needed help and assistance to better serve their communities’ preservation and educational needs.

I feel a lack within the profession of individuals from various minorities and ethnicities has contributed to the dearth of archival records documenting these communities. There is an acknowledged lack of diversity among archives professionals. As the SAA 2004 Archival Census and Educational Needs Survey (A*Census) report noted, out of the 5,620 self-identifying survey respondents, “there are very few minorities in the profession, with the largest identifiable group being African-Americans at 2.8%” (p. 485). Regardless of whether you, the archival studies student, are a member of a minority or ethnic community or not, our country is in great need of archivists specializing in these collections and the history of these communities in order to aid in the preservation of all participants in America’s “great melting pot.”

Despite these challenges, the MAC region is represented by a number of fine minority and ethnic archival collections in states such as Minnesota, Wisconsin, Ohio, Iowa, and Illinois that can and do offer graduate students experience in this area. African-American archives in Illinois and Ohio have been pioneers in preserving the memory of their black communities. Other Midwestern institutions, such as the Iowa Women’s Archives at the University of Iowa, have done pioneering work in the preservation of archival materials relevant to migrant Latino and Latina populations in the United States. Even so, I am told regularly by those in the field that one of the major difficulties in developing minority and ethnic collections is the lack of trained professional archivists with historical knowledge of those communities to aid in proper processing and collections development. American Indian tribal organizations, in particular, have been hard-pressed to find qualified archivists with exposure to American Indian (tribe-specific, in most cases) culture and history.

My somewhat generalized statements are not meant to isolate or overlook the fine work of institutions that are

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actively participating in growing collections in these areas. Still, as the necessity for the preservation of and access to the cultural memory of minority and ethnic history becomes more apparent, you may notice a growing call for archivists specializing in these areas of knowledge. Efforts by institutions such as The History Makers in Chicago and their “Increasing African-American Diversity in Archives” program have highlighted this burgeoning need in the field for archival students interested in minority archives. If you are a library science, archival studies, or public history student who is looking to become an archivist or even a public history professional, you have a golden opportunity to become a leader in an area of under-represented research and collections development within the archival community. To prepare yourself for such positions, take topical history courses on minority or ethnic histories, or continue classes in a foreign language. Graduate student projects in minority or ethnic archival collections add not only to one’s resume, but also contribute to the cultural preservation of these communities and institutions. Apply the American Library Association’s Core Value of Librarianship’s mandate on diversity to the archives field: “We value our nation’s diversity and strive to reflect that diversity by providing a full spectrum of resources and services to the communities we serve.”