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The Brandeis BLK Archives Collective: Dialogue Into Action

The work of the Brandeis BLK Archives Collective in the past two and a half years has examined many aspects of archival work in relation to questions of power and privilege. The Collective (or BBAC for short) was formed at Brandeis University in the fall of 2016 by establishing connections between Black activists of the #FordHall2015 movement, students and alumni of the University, and archivists. The initial aim was to talk about how to properly document #FordHall2015, the most recent Black student movement, through a series of video conference calls and a community meeting.

We grappled with the issues of using the tools, resources, and personnel of the same institution which the movement was trying to hold accountable. As we began to dialogue with one another, the interest group soon moved to raise our awareness of the broader picture. We discussed how archival work is done and what would be required to make this work more relevant and less destructive to our minoritized communities and to activists in particular.

This paper examines questions of archival practice from within an active cooperative project. It draws on the wisdom of students, alumni, staff, faculty, and some among them, archivists.

Brandeis University was envisioned as a Jewish-sponsored non-denominational small liberal arts university. The African American presence on this campus began when Ralph Bunche, American political scientist, academic, and diplomat, delivered the first convocation speech in 1949. The first Black students entered the freshman class that same year. This institution defined its core “Jewish values,” as a commitment to service, that of providing educational opportunity for everyone, and in educating the whole person.¹ To quote the 1949 inaugural speech by the first University President, “Brandeis will be a dwelling place of permanent values-- those few unchanging values of beauty, of righteousness, of freedom, which man has ever sought to attain”.² Examples of how this informed practices can be seen in early applications to the school which did not include a space to record religion or race, and that Brandeis University to this day does not recognize Greek organizations because of their exclusionary nature. The presence of some level of diversity from the beginning impacted the campus dialog in ways that brought a broader view, perhaps more than that of otherwise insular campuses.

Brandeis was quick to celebrate its open-mindedness publicly. A 1952 issue of *Ebony Magazine* touted the lack of social barriers and the wonderful experience of the eight Black students and one professor present at that time.³ Diversity was furthered by the founding of the Wien International Scholarship Program in 1958, which brought students of mostly European states, but also students of African and Asian descent. But even Angela Davis, graduating in 1965, noted a real lack of Black presence on campus.⁴

¹ Sachar, Abram L., Inauguration speech of October 8, 1949 in *Re-evaluation Report of the New England Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools*, 1966: 2-3.

² Sachar, Inauguration speech of October 8, 1949, 2-3.

³ “Brandeis University,” *Ebony Magazine*. February 1952, 59-63.

⁴ Angela Davis, interview by Julieanna Richardson, *The HistoryMakers*, Digital Archive, June 7, 2003: “Angela Davis describes the small black student population at Brandeis University,” Session 1, tape 5, story 4.

The University is associated with a high amount of student activism. From protests for South African Divestment (for the first time in 1961 and up through the announcement to fully divest in 1987) to the promise to provide space for all religious practices (at that time defined as Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant “...one for each of the great western faiths.”⁵ By far the most notable and widely known campus protest was the Afro-American Student Organization’s occupation of the Ford Hall building in January of 1969. With the exception of tremendous growth in the sciences in the early 1960s, those student demands accomplished more evolution in the college program since its founding years. Arguably, the achievements of these protestors represent some of the best evidence of social justice success on campus. The results of that activism included the creation of one of the earliest Afro-American Studies departments in the U.S. and a renewed focus on the educational and financial needs of student populations impacted by systemic racism. You cannot tell the history of Brandeis University without including Brandeis’ Black history. Also, you cannot ignore the promise Brandeis has made to its community, which is an interesting context in which to find student activism aimed at the institution itself.

In the fall of 2015, students occupied the administration building, demanding the same support in living and learning for students of color on this New England campus and holding the University accountable for its stated ideals. In the fall of 2015 the new Ford Hall movement, occurring in tandem with similarly concerned students across the U.S., but with a nod to their Brandeis predecessors, was named #FordHall2015. The activists began a renewed campus conversation.

⁵ Abram Sachar, *A Host at Last* (Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1976), 70.

The Black Students of Brandeis have a duty, and that duty is to get an education. The student activism of FORDHALL 69' and 15' are just that, a pursuance of unearthing and accessing education. An education that is not shackled, but that is boundless. That is the divine purpose of FORDHALL 69' and 15' to fight for equitable education. To accomplish that duty the posture of the university has to be one of acquiescence, a healthy academic environment has to employ ethical insurance to assure the productivity of its students. The students of these movements recognize the inconsistency in the paradigms that stand in the contemporary moment and assemble themselves as point to enter into re-construction.⁶

-Chariana Calloway, class of 2020 and #FordHall2015 leader.

One particular archivist was listening. The Robert D. Farber University Archives & Special Collections Department was founded in 1997, and part of the charge, like many university archives, is to document student life. Ask anyone who endeavors to do this and they will tell you what an easy task this is not. As one might guess, questions about past student activism are the bread and butter of our reference work; there is no subject more often sought. In the Fall of 2016, a year after the #FordHall2015 demonstrators issued their very public demand for their needs to be addressed, the Archives engaged in a series of conversations with some of the activists. The founding members of the BBAC were Queen White '16, Chariana Calloway '20, Wil Jones '18, professional archivist Micha Broadnax '12, and Maggie McNeely, University Archivist at Brandeis.

The questions that arose from these conversations were, and are, many. Who is an archivist? Is the archival practice of ownership of materials and narratives problematic, at best, for some communities? Why are archives meant for quiet solitary study? What can archives do with the materials it obtains, through a donor or through social media? Are some things not

⁶ Chariana Calloway, (Brandeis class of 2020 and FordHall2015 participant), email communication with Maggie McNeely, May 28, 2019.

appropriate to archive? What does a documented person or group gain from “being archived?”

Can archives be flexible in the way donations, restrictions, and access are handled? Why is surveillance a problem? Can current titling practices for collections be disenfranchising?

The BBAC has accomplished a lot in the last two and half years. In 2017 a new student position was created in the Archives to work as a liaison to help bridge barriers of culture, age, campus spaces, and networks. Founding members and student liaisons presented at the Black Lives Matter Symposium hosted by the African and African American Studies Department (AAAS). In that presentation student and alumni members looked to envision a new world in the archives, one which “lives and breathes” and where Black histories could be liberated. They looked at the archival reading room space with the critical lens set forth by Jarret M. Drake, one which questions the normalization of “Solitude, Silence, and Surveillance.”⁷ Also in 2017, BBAC members and Archives Liaisons Aja Antoine ‘17 and Mercedes Hall ‘17 conducted interviews of alumni at the 25th anniversary celebration of the Intercultural Center. In striving toward a more full and inclusive archive, one of the early ideas was to create an easily accessible digital online space which highlighted radical student histories and narratives. In 2018 we built a website, the Black Space Portal, where the history of Black movements at Brandeis is beginning to be told through this public resource created and narrated by students. The website and contents were produced by Wil Jones ‘18 and Marian Gardner ‘18. In February 2019 we hosted activists from Ford Hall 1969 in the archives reading room, and shared with them our collections and our dedication to preserving these narratives. These alumni had no idea that we had collected and

⁷ Jarrett M. Drake. “Liberatory Archives: Towards Belonging and Believing (part 1),” On Archivy (blog), Medium, October 22, 2016, <https://medium.com/on-archivy/liberatory-archives-towards-belonging-and-believing-part-1-d26aaeb0edd1>.

provided access to this material for many years, which confirmed the criticism that the archives was a silo and that impacted communities did not know that their stories were being told. Nevertheless, the alumni were extremely touched to see the very words and evidence of their labor valued and preserved. Our most recent BBAC work is a timeline of Black history at Brandeis created in conjunction with a new AAAS course Black Brandeis, Black History, taught by Dr. Chad Williams, department chair. Students in this class researched and provided content for current Archives Liaison Rai McKinley Terry to put together as a timeline.

We have also had our challenges. The archivist was not used to navigating multi-cultural spaces, and frequently experienced doubt, fear of failure, and burn out. Robin Diangelo's article and book called *White Fragility* states that many white people do not have the stamina to exist in racialized spaces for any significant period of time.⁸ The archivist was, and still is, limited to what time and energy can be diverted from managing large collections backlogs and the steep climb to achieving digital preservation success. The archivist admits to not being skilled at advocating within the institution, and to have simply carved out a space in her own work. This work can be very different to what most archivists are often busy with and requires stepping outside the silo, especially for some like the BBAC archivist, who likes to say they formerly had their head in an acid-free box most of the time. We have not figured out how to help share knowledge and experience within the archives department about this work. Project results have been shared but this has left out process. BBAC students were also very interested in the physical space of the campus, and how desirable it would be to have a new dedicated space, or plaque, or

⁸ Robin DiAngelo. *White Fragility: Why it's so Hard for White People to Talk About Racism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018).

monument. The way we have operated in the project is to focus only within the locus of power of the University Archives, we did not help students achieve more university-wide goals. Also, it is highly problematic to designate anyone as the representative for any group, and yet we have done this in practice with the student “liaison” position. We have strived to primarily use the voice of Black students and alumni in all of our BBAC projects, and without Black staff in the archives, or enough bandwidth to hire more than one or two people in this role, we are often relying on one or two students to be such a representative.

We have learned much about what has worked in our particular case. Staff or faculty with longer stays at the institution need to bridge the gaps between semesters, projects, and people, and in this case the archivist fulfilled that function. As seniors begin their new lives outside of their undergraduate years they cannot stay as connected as they might have wished. Someone needs to keep the vision alive, maintain continuity of the work, and look for new opportunities.

The BBAC did most of its initial trust building and educational work through volunteerism, but students should receive payment for their labor to work on projects. The institutional habit of relying on unpaid internships presupposes a level of economic independence that is not always present in minoritized communities. Planning further ahead than one semester, and altogether being too rigid, was not very effective. We have stuck to our original mission while building on interests brought about by new events and new people. The word “collective” is chosen on purpose, in that we recognize and leverage the differences among members of a group who may otherwise be lumped together, racially or otherwise. Fulfilling our mission means something different to different people, and individual members want to contribute in areas most meaningful to them. Providing an opportunity for dialogue, a platform

for work, and willingness to assist in that work is the core of what the staff archivist does on this project.

We do have some recommendations for others embarking on similar projects. Trust-building is essential, and that work is not quick and easy, and you may not get a lot of initial institutional support to do this kind of work. Additionally, certainly while the profession is still disproportionately white, a big part of this work for white archivists is to be open to examining our own power and position, and to encourage a critical exchange of ideas. It is an uncomfortable fact that with our societal focus on institutions, archiving translates to legitimization. It is therefore all the more important to conduct this work with marginalized communities, particularly students. If done well, activists feel supported and their needs and demands heard and reverberated in the institutional history. This has a real impact, notably for those students who, in addition to the demands of academic life, have taken on the extra burden of seeking justice for themselves and their communities.

Personal reflections

The authors have carefully considered the best way to present the work of the Brandeis BLK Archives Collective. The first instinct was to talk about incremental changes happening in archival theory and practice and share it using an academic voice. However this was not adequate, and professionalism itself can be problematic when we interrogate its role in

inequality. Our actual work occupies a sweet spot in between the personal and the professional. How could this work not be personal? The trust-building we conducted required going beyond the “professional”, as professionalism itself often requires of us impossible things. Often it means a reduction in natural human response.

One of the best illustrations of the weaknesses of professionalism is the flawed assertion that we can be unbiased in our work. Also, and perhaps even more relevant, the work of this Collective engages with archival theory and practice, but it does not begin with it. In this project we have made ourselves vulnerable and shared secrets and fears. We have valued personal experience and wisdom, reflection and truth-telling. We will proceed to a less academic, more personal approach to our work. To address only one or the other would be telling only half the truth.

What follows are a series of reflections by the authors on the questions and challenges brought about through the work of the BBAC.

Maggie’s reflection on a question about trust:

“I have a question for you.” Chari asks me, after a lot of false starts and hesitation, a question that seems to be on everyone’s mind. “Why are you at this table?” Others on the video call say “hold on” and steel themselves for the answer, and turning off their microphones. I answered “I am here because I was inspired by the Ford Hall 2015 movement, and I wondered how in my position I could make some change.” What did they expect me to say? What were they concerned about, perhaps my heart not being in this project? I still do not know the exact answer.

Rai's reflections on surveillance:

As we mentioned above, Jarret M. Drake writes about the issues of the archives, particularly the Reading Room, being a space that is one of discomfort for marginalized people. Despite my initial excitement to work in the archives, I did feel an increasing stuffiness in being housed in a windowless room in the library, which is surveilled on both sides by the white staff. Sound is discouraged, solitude is encouraged, and for someone who comes from a background which is based in communal and experiential learning, it can be a place of unbelonging, as if you yourself are misplaced. As BBAC member Wil Jones has noted, marginalized groups are often already dealing with triggering materials in the archive, and the visiting experience often mimics the trauma of the materials that they are accessing: Black bodies in a space of solitude under the watchful gaze of the powers that be. This is true even though the archives at Brandeis does not require an ID to enter. If I didn't work there, it is not a space I would enter or feel comfortable in, and any opportunity I had to do my work outside of the physical archive space, I did. This goes into another of the issues brought up by BBAC members at the BLM Symposium, which is one of archival location. One example brought up was the Archive House set up by Theaster Gates on the South Side of Chicago, which functions as an open community archive. To help curb these issues, and without anticipation that another archival space would be opened on campus, the original members of the BBAC made the choice to create an online portal dedicated these histories.

Maggie's reflection on white fragility:

No amount of feedback is ever enough. I have been in discussion with student activists volunteering their time, for months. We have covered a lot of ground. Why do I feel like a formless puddle on the floor after a single unremarkable conversation? I feel like if no one asserts that what I am up to is perfect, or what I am up to is a disaster, I will die from uncertainty. I think after this semester I will have to pause this project, maybe give it up altogether.

Rai's reflection on archival practice of ownership of materials and narratives:

The appropriation of materials from the communities into white institutional silos often results in their inaccessibility to the people by whom they are created or by whom they are the subject. Narratives which are subjected to co-opting by the University for its own gain has been among the top concerns of the BBAC. The students who created the content for the Black Brandeis timeline explicitly stated that they did not want the narratives of those who struggled before them used to market Brandeis as a school which has embraced the voices of its marginalized groups, who still struggle for basic care and consideration on campus. Rather they wanted to tell this history for the benefit of future students to understand the history of Black and marginalized students on campus, and to see that they have a place in the university history. They noted that this resource was invaluable for them to see as students, and they wanted to see it made available for incoming students of color to the university.

When I arrived on Brandeis' campus there was a library installation highlighting Black activism on campus, and this had a profound effect on how I viewed the institution, as one which valued and celebrated its Black history, and one in which this history was integrated into the

institutional history. However, as I became a member of the BBAC I learned that this was actually one of the BBAC projects. This elevated for me the understanding of the importance of how institutions handle and highlight the histories of their marginalized communities. It also raised an understanding that we must do the work ourselves, the university as an entity cannot and will not do it for us.

And is there room in the archives for our materials generally? Perhaps the archive is too constricted of a space to hold this history in the ways it needs to be held. How can we hold archival material in ways which don't confine it or render it lifeless in a system which encourages a sterile approach? How can the archives expand to be inclusive to histories that were not made to fit into its narrative, and how can they remain available to those to whom they belong?

Maggie's reflection on the established rules:

What rules deserve to be broken, and what allowances can be made? Since the BBAC was created, I have accepted oversized activist ephemera with an amended deed stating that the donor can take them back at any time. Do we need to expand our current definitions of privacy and of restricted material to include the needs of the marginalized? Though no group of activists have taken me up on it, I have offered to restrict materials in whatever way they decide is necessary. I have given the students hired for BBAC projects much more freedom and lack of oversight and the choice of how to proceed with their work, at the risk of raising staff eyebrows and not meeting project deadlines. I have questioned hiring practices. Students of color and in particular Black students have experience and insight which are important for this project, therefore should

such a person be hired over a white student who may have worked with archival material before? Change does not happen by accident or simply with progress of time, but what are we able to do professionally, institutionally, legally, and personally? Does some of this imply special treatment for one group over others, and if so is that acceptable?

Rai's reflection on the question of who is an archivist:

Do you need a degree? BBAC member Aja responded with a shrug in response to the idea that black student history needs to be collected and *included in official University history*. We can make our own archives, *tell our own stories*. I am torn on this subject due to my dueling ideas, I think one that many Black Americans face, of dealing between Africanist ways of doing history and Western ways, both of which we have been exposed to. Black history is oral and cultural history, and official academic historical practices require a much strict practice of archiving. We want to preserve our history in a way which is fluid, and which is a "living breathing history", while also wanting to be included in the larger historical narrative of our nation, institution, but not to be forced to fold into those strict practices. As Jarrett M. Drake says, the archival field does not equate archival profession, as professions ask complete compliance with its customs and ethics, even where they are steeped in racism.⁹ This leaves no room for the personal, intimate and communal bonds that Black culture brings when it enters the institutional archive. Much of the archival materials of Black life are housed in attics and cupboards, and much of the

⁹ Jarrett M. Drake. "I'm Leaving the Archival Profession: It's Better This Way," On Archivy (blog), Medium, Accessed on June 26, 2017, <https://medium.com/on-archivy/im-leaving-the-archival-profession-it-s-better-this-way-ed631c6d72fe>.

work is done by one, or a few members of a family, or community group. While there is nothing wrong with this, Black history, especially that of the mundane, is missing from the overall national narrative because it is missing from the archive. The task then becomes how to incorporate Black life into the archives in a way that respects Black historical practices, honors the essence of the materials, and does not separate the history from the people who continue to struggle.

Although we may not be able to capture entire histories the way we should, it is still important to exist in the space where institutional history is recorded. As active and aware donors to those institutions we need to control the narrative. Brandeis has captured student movement and protest but in large part has failed to document the everyday of marginalized student life, which is as radical a history to record as are the erupted moments of frustration, and the pain we experience here.

Maggie's reflection on naming archival collections:

On December 1, 2016 the activists invited interested staff and students to an evening session of conversation in the archives. One concern raised, one I had never anticipated, was about a collection named for a Brandeis Professor. The narrative of Black students taking over a building and issuing demands, in 1969, when such a move was potentially deadly for students, is organized under a name. That name is of a well-loved white professor, a professor known for supporting student activists. The professor who, not at all insignificantly, in 1969, gathered materials from across campus to document what was going on in Ford Hall. Three decades later he donated these to the Archives and the collection was promptly named for him. After hearing

about this concern, I decided to ask him how he would feel about changing the name of these particular materials. For a brief moment I thought we would be able to make a decisive move that would make everyone love and trust the archives. Over the course of discussions, the professor spoke to colleagues who affirmed for him that the naming convention, for the collector and donor, was standard, and that this is a way for his care and effort to be recognized. I am left with the question: must we be satisfied for being cognizant of this important issue in future donor negotiations, while the most significant, earliest, most important documentation will likely remain named as it was?

Rai on the overwhelming whiteness of the profession:

Through our most recent discussions it has become clear that many of us students do not have a restored faith in archives or archival practices, but rather, we trust the specific archivist working with us. Maggie has been someone who has gone above and beyond her previous experience and comfort level to educate herself, and who has listened to the student voice in shaping this work. And so overall, Maggie is where our loyalty begins and ends. Outside of this, our dedication is to the students who came before and will come after us, in making sure that their voice is heard and respected. What is great about Maggie is that she is not primarily an academic. She took her understanding of her role as University Archivist and used it to make what practical palpable change she could. Maggie is an unassuming person, so her advocacy is not the strongest, but her willingness to be open and listen to student voices about their needs, without placing her own biases on them, is rare in institutions of higher education.

Maggie's reflection on ultimate relevance of the University's collection:

In the earliest days of the BBAC I had a common spiel about the importance of documenting the Black experience within the institution. This included the perspective that you need to populate the archives with this material so that if a researcher fails to include the Black student voice, for example, that is only reflective of them as a poor researcher. One will not be able to avoid taking these voices into consideration, I said, won't that be great? One of the activists hired, when I went into my spiel, gave me the most subtle yet comprehensive response in a very thoughtful slight shrug of one shoulder. If I read this right, it means "If this story is not in the official narrative, we will find our own way to carry it on," or, "you should not expect me to be upset by the idea that these realities are not reflected in your world of boxes with paper for white people." This student was an amazing teacher for me, as this led to a further line of questioning about whether the goal was indeed to archive any and everything about Black life on campus, and whether the archives should be making that decision. This led me to wonder aloud "Is it even appropriate for me to try to archive Black Girl Magic?" The shoulder shrugger replied with a smile.

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