

Re-membering Blackness: Digital Archives, Collective Memory, and a University's Black History

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abstract: The Re-membering Blackness Digital Archive at the University of Scranton shares the university's racial story as part of a campus-wide initiative devoted to reconciliation and collective memory. By bringing together archival records on Black history in a thematic digital collection, the project presents a corrective lens through which the university community transformed its understanding of the historical Black experience on campus and considered how this history reverberates in the present. The initiative contributes to a growing collection of institutional research projects on African American history and the legacies of slavery and racism in higher education. This article considers the metaphor of archives as memory within critical archival literature, and it examines the relationship between archives and collective memory in the context of the University of Scranton's initiative to recover Black memory.

Introduction

In the 2021 spring semester, the Office of Community-Based Learning (CBL) at the University of Scranton in Pennsylvania sponsored a CBL Talk in partnership with the Black Student Union and the Office of Community Relations. CBL Talks expose students to some of the challenges and opportunities facing the city of Scranton and present ideas for positive change in the community.¹ The presentations are open to the public and recorded as pedagogical resources for CBL-designated courses. The spring 2021 CBL Talk was given by guest speaker Glynis Johns, founder and executive director of the Black Scranton Project. A nonprofit organization and local heritage initiative, the Black Scranton Project is dedicated to documenting and sharing Black history and culture in Scranton and exposing hidden narratives from the African American community in the broader northeastern Pennsylvania region.²

Johns's talk, "Black Scranton Then and Now," presented research on leading figures in Scranton's Black community and notable moments in the city's Black history. Johns also discussed some of the challenges Black college students encounter at a predominantly White institution, like the University of Scranton, and shared information about historical episodes of racism on campus. Specifically, she presented records from the University Archives and local newspapers that documented mock slave auctions held as fundraising events for campus groups and programs. These fundraisers occurred on campus from approximately the 1950s to the 1990s and followed a nationwide practice of mock slave auctions at institutions of higher education.³ The racist imagery and language documented in the historical records prompted emotional responses among many attendees and spurred campus dialogue following the presentation.

Johns's talk brought disillusionment to a campus that imagined itself as an anti-racist community without direct institutional ties to the legacy of slavery. The archival documents did not align with the community's collective memory and revealed events from campus history that were unknown to many. The CBL Talk and the campus dialogue that followed were received as a call to action. University administrators described Johns's research as a challenge and an opportunity to learn about, reflect on, and respond to a shared institutional history that includes episodes of anti-Black racism. The provost addressed the campus in a letter on February 26, 2021, stating:

These offensive activities trivialized the grave history of chattel slavery and systemic anti-Black racism in this country. We apologize for pain caused at the time by the racist and sexist character of these events and today as our campus community, especially Black students and employees, and the local Black community are reacquainted with them. This is an opportunity for institutional reflection, learning and, most importantly, action.⁴

In response, the Council for Diversity and Inclusion formed an Institutional Black History (IBH) subcommittee to examine the university's historical relationships with Black faculty, staff, students, and the broader community as part of ongoing campus efforts to foster greater diversity, equity, and inclusion. The IBH subcommittee's research initiative, "Re-membering Blackness at the University of Scranton: History as a Call to Action," took place over the 2021–2022 academic year. The research culminated in a digital archive to share the university's racial story. Grounded in the university's Jesuit and Roman Catholic mission, the initiative drew upon notions of "moral memory"—the collective and moral

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act of remembering—and "metanoia"—a process of individual and community transformation and renewal.⁵ The Re-membering Blackness Digital Archive brings together moments of Black memory scattered

across the university's past that had been displaced in the campus collective memory over time. By presenting this history in a thematic digital collection, the research initiative offers a corrective lens through which the university community transformed its understanding of the historical Black experience on campus and considered how this



history reverberates in the present. The institutional research project fostered transparent dialogue about the university's past by acknowledging historical episodes of racism on campus while also celebrating Black excellence throughout its history.

This article discusses the University of Scranton's Re-remembering Blackness initiative and the support provided by the Weinberg Memorial Library during the research and development of the digital archive. It contributes to a growing body of literature on the role of academic libraries in campus reconciliation work and considers how librarians' expertise in archival research and information organization can support similar reconciliation projects at educational institutions. This article also examines the metaphor of archives as memory within critical archival literature, and it explores the relationship between archives and collective memory in the context of the University of Scranton's initiative to recover Black memory.

Literature Review

Archives and Memory

Libraries, archives, and museums are commonly referred to as memory institutions, and notions about memory have maintained critical prominence in archives discourse. The vast archival literature devoted to memory that came with postmodernist critiques of the archival profession often problematized the relationship between archives, memory, and power within social and political structures. In 2002, *Archival Science* published two thematic issues devoted to "Archives, Records, and Power." The essays in these seminal issues consider the power dynamic between archives and memory, and they explore how archival practice mediates historical narratives and identity formation. In their introduction, guest editors Joan Schwartz and Terry Cook contend that "memory is not something found or collected in archives, but something that is made, and continually re-made."⁶ Recognizing archival power over collective memory, postmodernist discourse asked archivists to acknowledge the absence of objectivity and neutrality in archives and to provide more transparency for the interpretive and narrative aspects of appraisal and description. Schwartz and Cook argue that transparency in archival processes would support accountability within the profession and allow future generations to understand the role of archival practice in memory making.⁷

In 2013, *Archival Science* published a follow-up special issue, "Memory, Identity, and the Archival Paradigm," which reckons with archival literature's frequent invocation of memory and identity without deeper examination of their meaning and relationship to archives.⁸ In this issue, Cook contends that collective memory is not fixed. Archival appraisal and selection bestow significance and value upon records, thereby determining what is considered worth remembering or forgetting in the formation of memory and identity.⁹

Through appraisal and selection, archival practice arguably moves beyond a passive documentary role toward a more active role in the creation of memory. Wendy Duff and

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Verne Harris point out archivists' narration of the past through archival description and their participation in the construction of memory by choosing what information to make visible and what to exclude.¹⁰ Decisions made during archival description naturally result in some facts being highlighted in the historical record and other information being obscured or lost, sometimes merely as a result of brevity or incompleteness.¹¹ Laura Millar further complicates assertions of neutrality in archival decision-making during appraisal, selection, and description by observing that "everyone's present reality affects their sense of the importance of the past."¹²

Regarding collective memory, Michael Peters and Tina Besley assert that archives, as cultural institutions, are social frameworks that not only preserve and classify records but also use them "to re-create collective memory and sometimes to invent cultural histories."¹³ Rather than positioning archival institutions as official memory apparatuses, Millar posits that records and archives are simply touchstones through which we retrieve and articulate memories.¹⁴ For Millar, archival records are memory cues that prompt recollections of past events. She points out, however, that "there is not a one-to-one relationship between the record kept and the memory it stimulates."¹⁵ Margaret Hedstrom also delves into these "murkier notions" of how memories are created and encourages archivists to develop a more refined understanding of how memory is represented and retrieved by groups versus by individuals.¹⁶

The archival community's recognition of its subjective power over collective memory led to the development of community-driven and participatory archives, as well as more inclusive approaches to archival description and arrangement. Emily Monks-Leeson examines how participatory and community archives demonstrate "an increased attention to the postmodern qualities of malleability and multiple meanings," introducing the possibility of new contexts for archival records in online collections.¹⁷ Seeking to

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counteract the historical marginalization of underrepresented groups, community archives enable the subjects of records to participate in the creation of a memory apparatus for their community. Aldair Rodrigues, Mário Medeiros da Silva, and Paulo César Ramos discuss participatory approaches to archives whereby community members produce knowledge and descriptions for items and collections.¹⁸ Shaunna Moore and Susan Pell describe how archivists working with community-based collections may need to reread archival documents "against the grain" to draw out the narratives of underrepresented groups and ethnic minorities.¹⁹ The authors also discuss the concept of "autonomous archives" as spaces for communities to "critique dominant narratives of official history and ensure that the diversity of their experiences is represented within broader collective memories and heritage."²⁰ Lindsay Kistler Mattock and Aiden Bettine caution, however, that there is a conflation within the profession between community archives and community-engaged archival practices. The authors outline a

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continuum of community-engaged archival praxis that ranges from total citizen control to nonparticipation. In addition, they define categories of engagement for community archives, participatory archives, archival engagement, and archival outreach.²¹

Black History and Higher Education

In the last two decades, many colleges and universities embarked on research into their institutional ties to slavery and developed digital repositories for historical records on Black history. These projects demonstrate different approaches to reconciliation and memory work in higher education, and they provide case studies for building more diverse and inclusive archival collections. Librarians and archivists support these institutional initiatives by facilitating research, digitization, and descriptive work to make archival records available

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online and to connect a global community to Black history collections. The historical ties to slavery for some colleges and universities are evident and well-documented in their institutional archives and external research collections. For other institutions of higher education, connections to the legacy of slavery may be less apparent, less documented, or less understood by their campus communities. In 2005, the exhibition “Slavery and the Making of the University” was curated by archivists at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill as “one of the first systematic efforts on campus to examine the ways enslaved people enabled the university’s founding, growth, and wealth.”²² Other early examples of institutional research projects came from Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island, Emory University in Atlanta, and the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. Many other institutions followed, undertaking research into their historical relationships to slavery and racism.²³

In 2014, the University of Virginia in Charlottesville and the President’s Commission on Slavery at the university established a project called Virginia’s Colleges and Universities Studying Slavery. The project later developed into the Universities Studying Slavery (USS) consortium.²⁴ Universities Studying Slavery institutions work together to address historical and contemporary issues on race and inequality in higher education, and their joint initiatives often explore the complicated legacies of slavery.²⁵ In 2021, a partnership among Michigan State University in East Lansing, Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., and the University of Virginia developed the project On These Grounds: Slavery and the University.²⁶ The project’s

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database is composed of archival documents about the lives of enslaved individuals which reconstruct their experiences at institutions of higher education. Other projects celebrate Black excellence in local communities through exhibitions and digital collections

highlighting African American trailblazers. The Stanford University project "Histories of African Americans in Silicon Valley" was developed in 2021 with the university's Silicon Valley Archives. The initiative documents the legacies of African American tech pioneers in northern California. The collection includes oral histories as well as archival records on the scientific and technological innovations of the Black community there.²⁷

Georgetown University's initiative Slavery, Memory, and Reconciliation had special significance for the University of Scranton, partly due to the Jesuit connection between the two institutions. Though slaveholding did not occur at the University of Scranton, the Institutional Black History subcommittee recognized that the Maryland Jesuit plantations and Georgetown University's history of slaveholding impacted the broader Jesuit context in the United States. Some of the revenue from the sale of enslaved people at Georgetown went into the general fund of the Maryland Province of the Society of Jesus, with final payments recorded up to 1862.²⁸ This financial connection became a point of reflection for the University of Scranton, as a Jesuit institution directly connected to the history and finances of the Maryland Province. Georgetown's Slavery, Memory, and Reconciliation initiative is a long-term and ongoing process "to more deeply understand and respond to the university's role in the injustice of slavery and the legacies of enslavement and segregation in our nation."²⁹ Areas of focus for the initiative include engagement with the Descendant community, people whose ancestors were enslaved. It also involves collaborative public history and memorialization projects, and new academic research with faculty and students with support from archivists and librarians. Among digital research projects on Black history in higher education, Georgetown's efforts are notable for involving the Descendants of enslaved individuals in their reconciliation work. The curricular components of the initiative also highlight "the role of education as an essential component in finding inclusive and sustainable community-based solutions to current debates over the memory of slavery and its legacy."³⁰

Project Overview

Context

The University of Scranton is a private Jesuit and Catholic institution in northeastern Pennsylvania with a total student population of approximately 4,700. It is a predominantly White institution, with 74 percent of undergraduate students identifying as White / non-Hispanic and 3.5 percent as Black / African American in reporting data from October 2022.³¹ The university is a member of the Association of Jesuit Colleges & Universities (AJCU), and it positions its commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion as integral to its mission and Jesuit identity. The promotion of social justice and contemplation in action are core elements of Jesuit education and Ignatian spirituality, in addition to the principle of *cura personalis* (Latin for "care for the whole person"). These Jesuit values animate the university's approach to diversity and inclusion and its dedication to individual attention and respect for the uniqueness of each individual.

The university's provost and Office of Equity and Diversity established the Council for Diversity and Inclusion (CDI) in 2019 with a commitment to a campus culture characterized by respect and support for all community members.³² Following Glynis



Johns's CBL Talk in February 2021, the CDI recognized a lack of historical understanding of the university's Black history and responded swiftly to a campus call to action. The Institutional Black History (IBH) subcommittee of the CDI was formed in April 2021. Their research initiative, *Re-membering Blackness at the University of Scranton: History as a Call to Action*, embodied elements of the Ignatian pedagogical paradigm. This set of concepts includes context, action, and reflection to foster transformational learning within the community. The IBH subcommittee initiated the *Re-membering Blackness Digital Archive* to recover historical narratives of the Black experience on campus, to share the university's racial story, and to create a repository dedicated to that history.

Institutional Black History Subcommittee

The IBH subcommittee was composed of administrators, staff, faculty, and students at the University of Scranton across departments. It included the assistant vice president for community engagement and government affairs; three faculty members who teach in the disciplinary areas of Black studies, theology/religious studies, history, Latin American studies, and women's and gender studies; two student representatives from the Black Student Union; the dean and associate dean of the College of Arts and Sciences; the special assistant to the president and executive director of the Office of Equity and Diversity; and two faculty librarians from the Weinberg Memorial Library.

The IBH subcommittee was charged with locating records related to Black history in the University Archives and sharing them transparently and constructively with the campus community. During their initial meetings, the subcommittee defined specific outcomes for the research initiative, including campus presentations, curriculum integration, and a digital archive of their discoveries that would expand over time. The subcommittee also saw alignment between the *Re-membering Blackness* initiative and the AJCU's 2021 *Eyes to See: An Anti-Racism Examen*. An examen, or examination of consciousness, is a reflective practice in Ignatian spirituality. The *Eyes to See* examen focused on addressing the "reality of racism within and outside of our schools, in order to transform them—and to be transformed ourselves."³³ It invited AJCU colleges and universities to take an unvarnished look at their institution's past to discern a path toward an anti-racist and inclusive future. Reflection prompts of the examen included: "How have we told our college/university's racial story?" and "Whose voices were missing in the narrative and how does their absence affect us and the work we are doing?"³⁴

The IBH subcommittee used the examen as a starting point, but they expanded their project to include an examination of the relationship between archives and moral memory. The subcommittee was inspired by memory and reconciliation work at Georgetown University, another AJCU institution. Georgetown's examination of their own racial story provided guidance on best practices for institutional research on Black history. In the summer of 2021, members of the IBH subcommittee met virtually with Reverend David Collins, S.J., a scholar specializing in the processes of historical truth and reconciliation. Father Collins led Georgetown's Working Group on Slavery, Memory, and Reconciliation. In his meeting with the IBH subcommittee, he emphasized the importance of regular communication about the project's progress with the university community. He also described how their research was embedded into teaching and learning. He explained

that Georgetown included records on mock slave auction fundraisers in their Slavery Archive because these activities are tied to the memory of slavery in the United States. Father Collins served as a guest lecturer for the University of Scranton's Diversity & Inclusion "Lunch & Learn" series in February 2022. His presentation, "Jesuits & Slavery: A History in Search of Understanding," discussed Jesuit participation in slaveholding from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. It explored how this legacy of racial injustice and racism impacts all Jesuit institutions, including the University of Scranton.³⁵

The IBH subcommittee had many conversations about the conceptual foundation of the University of Scranton's research initiative. The discussions considered the moral objectives of memory work within communities as well as the concept of "metanoia."

In Jesuit teachings, metanoia is commonly referred to as a process of intellectual, spiritual,

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or personal transformation and reconciliation. The project's title, Re-membering Blackness, was adopted as a semantic device to evoke the act of remembrance, while also calling to mind the act of bringing things back together. Through historical reconstruction of Blackness on campus, the project team

sought to address the displacement of Black history in campus memory. A subcommittee member from the Department of Theology/Religious Studies and the Black Studies Concentration offered the following remarks about the project at a campus presentation:

The advent of the Black history archives is a possibility to ethically remember Black history in order to build more just futures at the university. But let's be clear, the work is not just to remember certain Black people who stood out in the crowd, not just to memorialize the first African Americans to do this or that as a way to feel good about ourselves, but to tell the truth about the conditions of what it meant to exist here, to pay attention to the ways in which Black students have to strategize to make it here, and to honor their brilliance over and against a system that often terrorizes them in secret. This is what womanist theologian Kelly Brown Douglas understands as moral memory. She notes that we need moral memory: "Moral memory is nothing less than telling the truth about the past and your relationship to it. Moral memory is not about exonerating ourselves for the past. Rather, it is taking responsibility for it. To have a moral memory is to recognize the past we carry within us." A past that is not past.³⁶

There were misconceptions on campus about access to records from the University Archives. Following the CBL Talk, questions were raised about whether the mock slave auction records were censored from public access, which led to concerns about the transparency of the archives relative to the university's racial past. Although the records are publicly available online, searching and discovering archival sources in the library's digital collections can present challenges for students and practiced researchers alike. Incomplete or inaccurate text recognition of digitized documents complicates keyword searching, and generalized item descriptions and minimal metadata further hamper the discovery process. These limitations impact users' ability to locate sources in the library's online archival collections. Regarding the mock slave auction records, some items were limited to on-campus online access due to the copyrights of local newspaper



publishers and their licensing agreement with the library. Users attempting to access the records off campus could not view them and saw, instead, a “Restricted File” icon. The Re-membering Blackness initiative was an opportunity for the library to reconsider how it communicates access options with its users and to educate the campus about effective search strategies with its archival collections. The author of the current article participated in the subcommittee’s campus presentations to discuss archival access and discovery, description, and collecting practices to build trust and offer transparency around the University Archives. The presentations enabled the library to share its commitment

to assessing its collecting practices and archival descriptions to build more diverse and inclusive collections. The mock slave auction newspaper clippings are now publicly available in the Re-membering Blackness Digital Archive with permission from the publishers for this project.

Library Research

The digital services department of the Weinberg Memorial Library oversees the publication of digitized and born-digital primary sources from the University Archives, McHugh Family Special Collections, and community partner organizations. The library uses OCLC’s digital asset management system CONTENTdm as the access and discovery platform for its archival and special collections. The author, a digital services librarian, served on the IBH subcommittee, led the library’s research and development team, and acted as the primary liaison between the two groups. The library’s team included the university archivist and special collections librarian, digital services assistant, digital services web developer, and special collections assistant. This group was responsible for archival research, digitization of print sources, development of the digital archive, and metadata generation.

Based on their experience working with the University Archives, the library team understood that many relevant records would likely appear in yearbooks, student publications, and local newspaper clippings. Research initially focused on gaining a better understanding of the mock slave auctions on campus—what records existed from these events, how often they occurred, and what type of language and imagery were used. As the research scope expanded, the library team discovered archival records documenting additional racialized activities and incidents of racism on campus. At the same time, the Re-membering Blackness project sought to celebrate Black excellence in the university’s history, so the

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library's team searched for records on Black trailblazers at the University of Scranton. Because the university lacked an official institutional archive until the late 1980s, it had few archival records of its history from earlier decades. Consequently, the IBH subcommittee and the library team often had difficulty identifying Black faculty and graduates due to limited information.

The University Archives' internal database includes folder- and item-level descriptions for accessions, but the accession titles often failed to provide enough information for the library team to determine if the records directly related to Black history. The titles of campus reports, for example, did not necessarily indicate whether the reports included details about campus diversity efforts, accounts of racism, or information about Black students and faculty. Misspellings and missing information also complicated the research process. The subcommittee and library team carefully followed department and office title changes to accurately track diversity and inclusion activities over time. For example, the Multicultural Center originated in the 1990s as the Cultural Diversity Subcommittee of the University Planning Committee. The group's name, composition, and organizational structure changed several times before it became a dedicated center on campus in 1997.³⁷ Given more time, a text analysis tool might yield additional research results from the library's collections. This method may be implemented in the future to analyze large text-based collections, including newspaper clippings, university reports, and yearbooks. While discovering an abundance of historical records was an important objective of the project, creating the infrastructure of the digital archive for Black history was a primary goal for the library team. Records will continue to be discovered, digitized, and added to the collection over time as it is used in teaching and learning at the university and to support community partnerships.

Metadata also impacted the research process. One example of this resulted from the IBH subcommittee's interest in records about campus events held in honor of Black History Month. They wanted to learn about the types and frequency of these events and what campus groups were involved. The subcommittee, however, had difficulty locating many of the relevant records because the metadata subject term in the library's digital collections was "African American History Month." The IBH subcommittee and library team agreed that "Black History Month" was the more commonly searched title, especially by students, and the revised term was added to records to aid discovery. As

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the project progressed, the library team developed a critical orientation toward metadata and subject term application to enhance the findability of records. Metadata remediation and enhancement, therefore, became part of the library's work on the Re-memembering Blackness initiative to support diversity in archival descriptions and build more inclusive collections. The library

discovered that subject terms on diverse and inclusive topics were often absent from records in the digital collections, such as LGBTQ people, racism, and hate crimes, as only a few examples. These and other terms were added to collection records to enable cross-collection discovery.



Results

Re-membering Blackness Digital Archive

The Re-membering Blackness Digital Archive (www.scranton.edu/rememberingblackness) shares over 600 records from the University Archives and local publications, including newspaper clippings, essays, student scholarship, correspondence, administrative records, and interviews. The collection unites disparate archival records and provides the infrastructure for continued acquisition of materials related to the Black experience at the university and activities in the local community.

In addition to creating a repository for archival records, the project highlights some of the pioneering figures in the university's history to celebrate Black excellence. Among the known pioneers was Louis Stanley Brown, the first Black graduate of the University of Scranton in 1919, then known as St. Thomas College. Brown earned a commercial degree and was described by his classmates as "ambitious and industrious" and someone who possessed a "happy humor, enjoyable wit, and good will."³⁸ In celebration of Black History Month, the university dedicated Louis Stanley Brown Hall in his honor in 2016. In 2021, the Louis Stanley Brown Black Student Union (BSU) was formed as a campus advocacy group for Black students and to develop a sense of community around the Black experience. Another trailblazing figure, Karen Pennington, is believed to be the first Black woman enrolled at the University of Scranton when it became a coeducational institution in 1972. Pennington had an illustrious career in higher education, serving as the first associate dean of students and director of student activities at the University of Scranton. The university's class of 1986 dedicated their yearbook to Pennington, writing that she "always managed to make time to listen to us all and to make us feel important."³⁹ Pennington later served for 22 years as the vice president for student development and campus life at Montclair University in Montclair, New Jersey.

A seminal Black faculty member in the university's history was Louis Mitchell, a professor of English from 1961 to 1989 whose scholarship focused on African American literature and eighteenth-century literature and theater. Mitchell studied harmony, composition, piano, violin, and the organ at the New York Institute for the Education of the Blind. He earned his bachelor's and master's degrees from Fordham University and a Ph.D. from New York University. Mitchell wrote an essay about the Black experience and racism in Scranton in a 1969 issue of *Esprit*, a publication of the university's English department. In the essay, Mitchell describes a city that does not view itself as having a racial problem. He attributes this attitude to "self deception and fear and its sister, insecurity (which has no season of its own). When we are afraid of an unknown, we hide, retire, retreat, or ignore the cause of its existence."⁴⁰ He describes the injustices that the Black community experiences in Scranton, writing: "There are still bars and clubs that refuse drinks to blacks; for-rent signs are still torn down when blacks appear; black job applicants are still offered menial tasks automatically."⁴¹ Mitchell further observes that the "political, social, and religious institutions of Scranton have wretchedly failed the black community."⁴² He states that the university has also "fallen short in its duties to the black community" in that it "barely, if at all, includes black history and black literature in its curriculum."⁴³

Mitchell's penetrating essay about Scranton in the 1960s was not easily discoverable in the library's online collections. Some pages were missing from the digitized version of *Esprit*, which limited text recognition for search terms, and the subject headings were limited to "University of Scranton—Periodicals"; "University of Scranton. Department of English and Theatre"; and "College students' writings." Lacking more robust subject terminology, resources in the University Archives related to racism, the Black experience, and social justice issues were not discoverable via linked subject terms. Minimal metadata was partly due to the rapid development of the library's online archival collections to provide access to a high volume of materials within a short time. To quickly process and upload serial publications from the University Archives, metadata was applied with little descriptive detail or subject differentiation. The University Archives located a print copy of Mitchell's essay with the missing pages intact, the complete version was digitized to replace the existing record, and additional subject terms were added.

While the library team discovered hundreds of records about the Black history of campus, it became evident that the University Archives had significant gaps, primarily in the decades before an institutional archive was established. The library invited the university community and alumni to donate additional materials related to Black history to the Re-membering Blackness collection, and the digital archive has a "Contribute" section to encourage the public to participate in growing and sustaining the archive.

HIST 190 Digital History

The Institutional Black History subcommittee integrated the Re-membering Blackness project into the curriculum at the university. In the 2021 fall semester, History Department faculty incorporated Black history research into the coursework of HIST 190 Digital History, which introduces students to fundamental theories and methods in digital history. Course assignments asked students to search the archives for relevant records and develop a narrative website to contextualize the primary sources they discovered. Working in groups, students researched three topics related to the university's Black history: (1) student activism in response to the civil rights movement; (2) Black athletes; and (3) examples of racial inclusion and exclusion amid the onset of affirmative action. During the fall 2022 and 2023 semesters, students in HIST 190 continued to use the Re-membering Blackness Digital Archive to further explore the university's Black history, and the archive's resources were integrated into course assignments.

Faculty librarians in the Weinberg Memorial Library collaborated with history faculty to provide course-integrated information literacy and digital humanities instruction. The

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research projects were opportunities for students to engage in inquiry-based and active learning with the University Archives, and the course supported instruction on research strategies and workshops on digital tools. Importantly, students confronted archival issues like those encountered by the IBH subcommittee, including privacy, copyright, and archival description. Course assignments



engaged students in critical thinking about the relationship between archives, historical narratives, and collective memory, and students were asked to consider how archival silences might tell their own story about an institution's past and its values.

Discussion

In "Archives, Records, and Power: The Making of Modern Memory," Schwartz and Cook quote Maurice Halbwachs, an early theorist on collective memory and identity, when they advise archivists that "remembering (or re-creating) the past through historical research in archival records is not simply 'the retrieval of stored information, but the putting together of a claim about past states of affairs.'"⁴⁴ The Re-membering Blackness Digital Archive, in many ways, puts together such a claim about the past to tell the truth about the Black experience at the university. The process of historical recovery revealed that the University of Scranton's past is not independent of its present. Remembering an institutional past through archival research resulted in the deconstruction of a distorted contemporary view of campus culture. In April 2022, the IBH subcommittee presented their research at a Diversity and Inclusion "Lunch & Learn" event. During the event, subcommittee member Nicole Hoskins observed: "In Black studies, being in the afterlife of slavery is the ground from which we theorize. It is precisely what many in the world (and might I say at this university) want to ignore. 'This is the past,' they say. 'Get over it.' But we must come to terms with the reality that we are living in this afterlife. In other words, the past is not yet past."⁴⁵

Peters and Besley argue that to control the archive is to control the past through the management of records that assert truth and validity about past events.⁴⁶ The politics of the archive, therefore, create a space not where "historical knowledge is preserved, but rather where meaning is created and the memory of a certain discourse is determined."⁴⁷ The Re-membering Blackness Digital Archive both preserves and creates Black memory. The collection reconstructs the historical Black experience and shifts it from the margins of the University Archives to the center of campus discourse. Yet Peters and Besley caution that digital archives, while broadening access to archival sources, paradoxically mediate our relationship to the past.⁴⁸ The online publication of the Re-membering Blackness records as a thematic grouping is a form of historical mediation made possible by digital technology. The project embraces the power of meaning-making with digital archives to contest the collective myth that the university was not tied to the legacies of slavery and anti-Black racism in the United States.

During the curation and development of the Re-membering Blackness Digital Archive, the IBH subcommittee and library had to navigate issues related to privacy, archival ethics, and the selection criteria for archival sources. At times, it was challenging to arrive at a consensus regarding the publication of records documenting racialized activities, victims of racism, and racist crimes. Rodrigues, da Silva, and Ramos discuss the importance of the right to

At times, it was challenging to arrive at a consensus regarding the publication of records documenting racialized activities, victims of racism, and racist crimes.

privacy in a digital age to maintain human dignity during the process of reconciliation and memory work with archival collections.⁴⁹ Decisions to publish records in the Re-membering Blackness collection were ultimately based on professional standards and ethics, while considering the lived experiences of committee members, critical archival discourse, and disciplinary expertise. The IBH subcommittee understood that their reconciliation efforts and research project would require continuous campus reflection and development. A harmful content statement is included on the project's homepage and under the "About" section to alert users to racist and offensive language and imagery in some of the archival records in the collection.

The Re-membering Blackness Digital Archive demonstrates for academic librarians that reconciliation work through archival research will be specific to their institutional context and community objectives. This article hopes to convey that smaller academic

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libraries should not be discouraged by the magnitude of memory work or feel paralyzed by a lack of historical documentation in their archives. The Re-membering Blackness project originated from a community discussion about Black history. Libraries and archives can work with community partners to capture the narratives of underrepresented

groups and learn about histories that have not yet been told. Smaller-scale archives can also embark on critical descriptive work and metadata enhancements to create more inclusive collections.

Many historians and archivists argue that silences in archival collections can lead to new methods for reconstructing historical narratives. Saidiya Hartman contends that, in the face of archival silences, historians can generate narratives from the fragments that do exist. Reading archives "against the grain" to draw out underrepresented stories embraces new ways of "knowing" in archival research. To illustrate this point, Hartman discusses the concept of critical fabulation in Black feminist writing that imagines "what might have happened or might have been said or might have been done."⁵⁰ This historical approach engages in "radical imagination to bring into focus what—and who—could never be in the archive."⁵¹ For Rodrigues, da Silva, and Ramos, this methodology introduces "new possibilities for the historical reconstruction of the black experience."⁵² They advocate for a similar approach to Black history to provide "access to other ways of imagining the

Many archivists and academic librarians are taking advantage of the curricular possibilities of scrutinizing archives in information literacy instruction.

past and its relationship with the present and the future."⁵³

Many archivists and academic librarians are taking advantage of the curricular possibilities of scrutinizing archives in information literacy instruction. The history course Slavery and the

Emory Archive at Emory University encourages students to critically analyze archival silences in the historical record. It asks them to interrogate archival systems and question



how “enslaved people were described over the course of the 20th century, and why is it difficult to find their voices.”⁵⁴

Duff and Harris argue that descriptive work by archivists is a form of storytelling and that “every narrative construction of the past is by definition creative, a work of the imagination.”⁵⁵ In this way, the Re-remembering Blackness Digital Archive is a form of digital storytelling and perhaps not an archive in a traditional understanding of the term. The site recontextualizes archival records to generate new meanings and knowledge about the past, whereby the archive becomes a critical scholarly project. Monks-Leeson points out that postmodern archival discourse led to semantic challenges to the term *archive* and destabilized the image of archives as “bounded and stable sites of knowledge.”⁵⁶ Rachel Lobo supports this destabilization and argues that archival projects should “adapt to new forms of archival representation and contexts, allowing for shifts in traditional methods and definitions.”⁵⁷ Quoting archival theorist Eric Ketelaar, Cook suggests that archives which embrace memory and meaning-making “may constitute a healing ritual; archives as a space of shared custody and trust.”⁵⁸

The IBH subcommittee was mindful of what S. L. Ziegler describes as the “danger that predominantly white institutions lean too heavily on traditionally excluded communities to help us fix our self-imposed racism problems.”⁵⁹ The subcommittee also understood the significance of what Gabriel Apata identifies as Black solidarity within “a landscape that whiteness has constructed” and the importance of honoring that solidarity throughout the institutional research.⁶⁰ Apata observes that fellowship within the Black community is partly derived from “what the archives and the memories tell him or her, of the history of black subjugation under white power and the collective psychology that that induces.”⁶¹ Throughout the initiative, feedback was gathered from Black students and faculty, and the IBH subcommittee regularly consulted with African American community leaders in Scranton. Koebe Diaz and Tiannah Adams, founding members of the university’s Black Student Union, reflected on the Re-remembering Blackness project after its completion. Diaz explained, “The things that happened in the past are still affecting what’s happening now; unless we address what happened in the past, we’re not going to be able to move forward.”⁶² For Adams, reconciliation and memory work linked to campus-wide learning about a shared institutional past. Adams observed that “everything that has happened in the university’s past needs to come to light, and then we can work on reconciliation and rebuilding the relationship with Black students and other students of color on campus.”⁶³

In addition to assisting the IBH subcommittee with research, the library team undertook several responsibilities related to the development of the project’s website and digitization of archival records. Executing this work while balancing primary job responsibilities resulted in some truncated item descriptions and occasional display irregularities. Metadata enhancements are ongoing as the digital archive continues to expand in scope and is used for research. Lobo advocates for a “good-enough approach” to metadata during the development of digital collections in the interest of quickly getting materials online.⁶⁴ She discusses the Rise Up! Feminist Archive, a digital collection of newspapers, newsletters, and magazines on feminist activism in Canada from the 1970s to 1990s. Making the resources available online and breaking down physical barriers to access came “at the expense of archival description; the only metadata listed for each publication is the title, publisher, date, region, and city/town.”⁶⁵

Limitations with metadata are not viewed as a disadvantage for many archivists working with community archives and thematic digital collections. The metadata is often seen as provisional. Duff and Harris contend that “records are always in the process of being made, that ‘their’ stories are never ending.”⁶⁶ The two authors support a liberatory approach to descriptive standards “to affirm a process of open-ended making and re-making.”⁶⁷ The Re-membering Blackness Digital Archive invites the community to contribute descriptive metadata for primary resources; the Omeka module Tag It! enables users to propose subject terms for items that relate to names, places, and events.

Student records, including documents from campus groups like the Black Student Union, were collected for the digital archive. These materials, while increasing the volume of resources in the Black history collection, also introduce student agency in the creation

By donating their records and original research, students discovered their role in the construction of the historical record using their own voices and experiences.

of Black memory at the university. By donating their records and original research, students discovered their role in the construction of the historical record using their own voices and experiences. They became the creators of archival records and not solely subjects within the archives. Black Student Union officer and IBH subcommittee member Koebe Diaz gathered oral histories from Black students as part of an independent research project. The interviews were added to the University Ar-

chives and published in the Re-membering Blackness Digital Archive. Speaking about the interviews, Diaz shared:

I really enjoyed doing archival research with Dr. [Nicole] Hoskins and as a part of the subcommittee on Black History. That really brought everything full circle for me, because I was able to include some of the people I met through the BSU and to talk about what the BSU means for other students and the impact that that’s making. And also, I was able to look at the past and see what it means for our future and for our current experience. I can see moving forward how other Black students on campus can be involved in the research that’s ongoing. There’s a momentum that’s building there.⁶⁸

Recent scholarship demonstrates that students gain a sense of agency when they see themselves reflected in archival and special collections. Charlotte Nunes and S. Abu Turab Rizvi discuss community-based digital archives supported by academic libraries

... by working with community organizations to develop more inclusive research collections, students see themselves reflected in the collections, which engenders a sense of belonging.

to advance diversity and inclusion in higher education. They explain that by working with community organizations to develop more inclusive research collections, students see themselves reflected in the collections, which engenders a sense of belonging.⁶⁹ They point out that “non-representation in archives can produce feelings of marginalization and alienation from the campus environment and the



undergraduate experience as a whole.”⁷⁰ Michelle Caswell and her coauthors contend that a sense of connectedness to the past through the archives can be “a survival strategy that enables people to counter feelings of erasure and isolation.”⁷¹ Community-driven and participatory archival projects can also empower historically marginalized and underrepresented groups “to represent their past, construct their present and envision their futures as forms of liberation.”⁷² The Weinberg Memorial Library at the University of Scranton continues to prioritize the development of diverse and inclusive collections through community partnerships to reflect an increasingly diverse student body. Looking forward, the Re-membering Blackness project has the potential to become a participatory and community-centered archive and avoid a reiteration of the historical marginalization of Scranton’s Black history.

Conclusion

Groups of people do not remember spontaneously. They must come together intentionally to share memories and to consciously define their collective history.⁷³ Through the Re-membering Blackness research initiative, many records related to mock slave auctions at the University of Scranton were discovered, as well as evidence that documented acts of racism and racialized activities in the university’s history. These records from the University Archives differed from the moral vision the university community had of itself. The Re-membering Blackness Digital Archive provides a corrective lens through which the university transformed its understanding of the campus experience from a non-White perspective and considered how this history impacts the present. Critical archival literature often quotes Jacques Derrida’s seminal work *Archive Fever*, which contends that, in the archives, with remembering comes forgetting. Giving consideration to this dichotomy, Cook reminds us that “memory is notoriously selective—in individuals, in societies, and, yes, in archives.”⁷⁴ When we choose to remember, there is the “inevitable privileging of certain records and records creators, certain functions, activities, and groups in society, and the marginalizing or silencing of others.”⁷⁵ Schwartz and Cook suggest that archives are “the basis for and validation of the stories we tell ourselves, the story-telling narratives that give cohesion and meaning to individuals, groups, and societies.”⁷⁶ Institutional research projects like the Re-membering Blackness Digital Archive are necessary to partake of more diverse and inclusive stories from our shared histories.

The title of the February 2021 CBL Talk by Glynis Johns, “Black Scranton Then and Now,” offers a point of reflection for the Re-membering Blackness project. It recalls what archivist and writer Laura Millar describes as a blurring of lines between “then and now” that came with the emergence of digital technologies for the representation of archival materials online.⁷⁷ At the University of Scranton, the disruption between “then” and “now” was felt by the CBL Talk audience as they saw archival records of mock slave auctions for the first time. Because of these blurred

Responses to historical records are often informed by present circumstances that shape our experience of remembering past events.

lines, Millar suggests that records facilitate “many responses, some evidential and some psychological,” and we must acknowledge the memory gap “between the record, the event, and the emotion.”⁷⁸ Responses to historical records are often informed by present circumstances that shape our experience of remembering past events. Millar reminds us that “to remember, we must be living in the present, so we can compare a moment in the ‘now’ with a moment in the ‘then.’”⁷⁹ The Re-membering Blackness Digital Archive sought to address the marginalization of narratives from an underrepresented group on campus and the overall erasure of Blackness in university history. The institutional research initiative encouraged the university community to reflect on the past to enact positive change in the present and build a more just and inclusive campus.

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