

## **BRAVERMAN ESSAY**

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# **“BREAKING SECRETS” IN THE CATALOG: PROPOSING THE BLACK QUEER STUDIES COLLECTION AT THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN**

**by Kristen Hogan**

In the spring of 2009, newly enrolled at the University of Texas (UT) School of Information, I piled in the car with my partner and a friend and drove north up I-35, a major highway that segregates Austin by class and ethnicity. At Southwestern University, the Feminist Studies Program was hosting “Transgenderism and Citizenship: A Dialogue” between Eli Clare and Matt Richardson. Talking together, the two authors and scholars modeled a possibility for thinking through connections among ethnicity, nationality, class, disability, gender, and sexuality. After the event, Richardson and I began to talk about cataloging. From the violence of borders drawn by highways to those drawn by language, I wanted to attempt a new possibility for building relationships and visibility in the library catalog. After teaching women’s and gender studies and documenting feminist bookstores as vital distribution sites that changed publishing as bookwomen lobbied for (and as) women readers, I saw a need for librarians to amplify their similar roles, particularly in a changing book industry.

Richardson, UT faculty in the English Department, the Center for African and African American Studies (CAAAS), and the Center for Women’s and Gender Studies (CWGS), had already asked UT Libraries Women’s and Gender Studies subject specialist Lindsey Schell whether it would be possible to improve catalog access to and representation of Black Diasporic LGBT materials at the UT Libraries. When I proposed, with Schell’s support, a student project changing subject headings for select titles, staff in the cataloging department responded by dismissing the “complex” project for such a “small collection.” Frustrated, I created an independent study that summer with UT School of Information professor Melanie Feinberg to imagine a critical cataloging practice for Black queer and trans materials; through this course, I drafted a proposal to change UT

cataloging and to develop a critical theory for library staff. Richardson and I used the proposal to garner support from CAAAS and CWGS, both of which pledged funds for growing the collection. The proposal and coalition fueled advocacy for what would become the Black Queer Studies Collection (BQSC).

This spring, Schell presented the proposal to Jee-Hyun Davis, Assistant Department Head, Cataloging and Metadata Services. Davis approved the proposal, and after negotiations with her supervisor, is implementing the proposal. Fifty items purchased with Richardson's library funds form the core of the collection. Catalogers added to these records a uniform identifier, "Black Queer Studies Collection," approved by the CAAAS Executive Committee, in the searchable MARC field 590, used by UT Libraries to designate other virtual collections. Bibliographers can identify records and catalogers can add the MARC identifier with a single grouped process. To grow the collection, I compiled a list of OCLC numbers for all materials listed in the groundbreaking bibliography *Carry the Word: A Bibliography of Black LGBTQ Books* (Fullwood, Harris, Moore) and currently owned by the UT Libraries. Catalogers will add the BQSC identifier to this list of over 450 items. Richardson will serve as liaison with Schell to continue additions at the recommendation of local scholars, and I have developed publicity to promote use of this research and visibility tool.

The BQSC project provides an ideal entry into articulating the critical practice of library staff because scholars of its subject, the field of African and African American LGBT studies, explain how categorization and naming have played a central role in supporting historical and ongoing oppression. Concerns of categorization, erasure, and renaming remain at the core of African and African American Studies and its intersections with fields including queer theory and transgender studies. Institutions have used quantification and categorization to oppress each and all of these identities. In turn, social movements founded in liberal rights-based theories of liberation have appealed for entrance into categories of acceptability, thus indicating the power of identity categories.

The work of African American Queer and Trans Studies tracking categorization as a tool of oppression demonstrates that librarians, as critical practitioners, have a responsibility to explore and resist this categorical violence. Iconic queer theorist Michel Foucault argues that the "homosexual" identity was consolidated in the 1800s by a discourse which recognized the "homosexual" as pathological. Roderick Ferguson critiques the limitations of this history by challenging readers to examine how systems of identity categorization (medicalization in this case) engage with narratives of sexuality not apart from but steeped in narratives of race and gender, both also medicalized categories: "As Foucault's text takes psychoanalysis and medicalization as racially denuded procedures and as the taken-for-granted domains of sexuality's emergence, the text has monopolized the conversations about sexual formations and steered them away from considerations of race" (86). With limited institutionally-

recognized categories for human value, Ferguson emphasizes, “African American elites learned the tactics of sexual and gender regulation from the itineraries of imperialism, imposing those tactics onto black poor and working-class folks. [...] By adopting normative gender and sexuality, African American elites waged war against the state’s racialized exclusions, teaching their children the same strategies” (98). By separating race, gender, and sexuality studies, information organizing practices drive these category-reifying strategies of exclusion in pursuit of acceptance and an end to violence.

For example, library studies scholars Hope Olson and Rose Schlegl contribute to a body of work on how the Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) support the erasure of marginalized communities. Olson and Schlegl point out that LCSH can create significant barriers to information access and contribute to the oppression, particularly because LCSH entries are prominent in catalog records: “the omissions and racist, sexist, xenophobic, etc., biases in subject headings are presented to us directly on the screens of our online catalogues” (66). Olson and Schlegl also emphasize that classification and, thus, context similarly constructs a narrative that can support or obscure researcher access to and perception of materials: “Biases in classification are more subtle and many library users, as well as some librarians, regard classification as simply a shelf address, disregarding the influences of context on how a work is perceived” (66). The BQSC addresses both naming and context through creating a virtual collection that creates a significant context for the materials. Olson supports this use of MARC records to reimagine the catalog: “Use of this MARC authority field could be expanded to other types of relationships between specific headings or more specific codes could be added to the subfield that defines relationships” (534). As BQSC use of MARC radically suggests, LIS professionals have the tools to easily create significant change.

Because of the shortcomings in library systems of information organizing, the BQSC use of an independently-published bibliography to recognize relevant records acts as a model of librarianship taking direction from a grassroots initiative. Community-generated bibliographies indicate the ongoing need for more innovative information organization and emphasize the role of information organization in perpetuating or interrupting narratives about its subjects. Marginalized communities have acted as their own librarians and developed bibliographies to connect readers with resources obscured by naming, classification, and collection policies. *Carry the Word*, the 2007 joint project of two independent Black queer presses, RedBone Press and Vintage Entity Press, offers an extensive bibliography along with interviews with contemporary Black LGBT authors. In his introduction to the research tool, author Reginald Harris writes the editors’ hope “that libraries and bookstores will use this bibliography to assist in expanding their collections; that scholars will use it as an aid to their research and curriculum development; and that readers will use it to discover books they may have missed and discover new authors to explore” (Fullwood, Harris, Moore x). Harris’ specific goals and the recent publication of this

bibliography emphasize the urgent need for innovative research services in this field. Librarian Tatiana de la Tierra supports this call. Thwarted in her research of Latina lesbian literature by Boston University's (thus, Library of Congress') cataloging practices, de la Tierra explains the relevant function of alternative research tools: "petitioning catalogers to modify subject headings as appropriate is a good strategy, because the catalogers who have the power to name, to brand, and to label a book are only human. But beyond book-by-book petitioning, writers and publishers need to employ bibliographies" (102). The use of such bibliographies indicates a niche where librarians might articulate their value to scholars. When scholars, authors, and publishers are participating in a revolution of information organization, librarians should take this as an indication of user need and as an opportunity for communicating and demonstrating to a public the vital role of librarians in their research. I suggest that librarians can reclaim their centrality to the research process by reflecting on their practices and creating, in collaboration with scholars, innovative tools for research.

Because librarians cannot change information organization without reflecting on their own unearned privilege and how that privilege is reflected in exclusionary information systems, I participate in that self-reflection here. Erasing myself in this narrative would enact my own white privilege. I am a white, anti-racist, queer LIS student. These identities, some of my categories, begin to describe how this proposal establishes my identity, just as the work of library professionals establishes not a neutral practice but a specific embodiment of their own identities. LIS scholar Anthony Dunbar counters the fiction of objectivity, noting of archivists' work: "when a record is created, it establishes at least two identities, that of the documenter (or records creator) and the documented (the subject of the record)" (124).

As a white anti-racist scholar calling for the revision of library practice around materials by and about African and African American lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people, I draw on feminist theory to emphasize the importance of my initial collaboration with and the need for library professionals' continued collaboration with scholars of African and African American queer studies in carrying out this project. Librarian and Kenyan-exile Shiraz Durrani notes the concrete effects of identity, of representation, within institutional structures: "Change will only come when there are enough Black librarians in the position of power at local and national level. Those who wield power in the profession also control finances, research grants and make policies" (88). As a queer, white lesbian I participate as an involved ally with queer people of color, and I recognize, with Ferguson, that narratives of sexuality cannot be separated from those of race, gender, class, nationality, and ability.

This recognition of a need for agency of historically marginalized people within the profession does not absolve the responsibility of those whose identities do not align with the subject at hand. Feminist ethicist Linda Alcoff points to feminist and critical race theorist Gayatri Spivak's

explanation that rejecting responsibility under cover of referring to a more “authentic” speaker essentializes the speaker, makes the same assumptions that LIS puts forth now about neutrality, that a particular speaker could divulge an absolute and objective truth by virtue of her location (Alcoff 491). To acknowledge that it is, thus, impossible for anyone to speak objectively is to identify each speaker as a theorist, one who reflects on and contextualizes their narratives, and is to identify the LIS professional herself as theorist, critical cultural worker who creates identity (Feinberg). Alcoff concludes that we “should strive to create wherever possible the conditions for dialogue and the practice of speaking with and to rather than speaking for others” (491). This ethic of dialogue is most dear to me as an anti-racist activist and teacher; central to the process of proposing the BQSC has been generating a vibrant dialogue around information systems and scholarship at the University.

This dialogue between scholarship and librarianship identifies the vital need for the BQSC to redress violences carried out by silences in the catalog. In Matt Richardson’s 2006 afterword to Aunt Lute Books’ new edition of the novel *Her* [originally published in 1995], Richardson demonstrates the power of a list of texts when he employs an abridged version of a Black lesbian bibliography to dispute claims that ‘there’s not much out there’:

[Cherry Muhanji’s novel] *Her* is not alone as a Black lesbian text that challenges conventional perspectives on Black history and culture. It joins a body of work published since the 1970s by African American women with explicitly lesbian themes, such as Ann Allen Shockley’s *Loving Her* (1974) and *Say Jesus and Come to Me* (1982); Gloria Naylor’s *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982); Ntozake Shange’s *Sassafrass, Cypress, & Indigo* (1982); Audre Lorde’s *Zami, A New Spelling of My Name* (1982); and Jewelle Gomez’s *The Gilda Stories* (1991). *The Serpent’s Gift* by Helen Elaine Lee (1994); *Po Man’s Child* (1999) by Marci Blackman; *Callaloo & Other Lesbian Love Tales* (1999) by LaShonda K. Barnett; and *The Bull-Jean Stories* (1998) and *love conjure/blues* (2004) by Sharon Bridgforth are only a few of such titles published in the U.S. after the publication of *Her*. (“Black Queer Memory” 193-4)

Richardson’s list emphasizes a body of literature and points to how critical librarianship, by creating or not creating similar lists, substantiates or undermines a field, a literature, and a readership. Through lack of adequate subject headings and research tools which make the materials difficult to locate individually and impossible to locate together in any significant number at a single time, the pre-BQSC UT Library Catalog continued historical erasures of African and African American lesbian, gay, and transgender materials and, thus, identities. The following obstacles to research in the catalog interface offer opportunities for professional librarian engagement.

Current subject headings insufficiently describe the subjects of African and African American lesbian, gay, and transgender materials (Valentine; Olson); Table 1 collects four examples from the Library Catalog. Among these examples, subject headings easily identify *Carry the Word* as a text relevant to African and African American Lesbian, Gay, and Transgender Studies. The remaining records, their subjects obscured by their records, are *Erzulie's Skirt*, Ana-Maurine Lara's novel also published by the Black queer publisher RedBone Press and about two African Caribbean women lovers' creation of home in a stratified Dominican Republic; *love conjure/blues*, another RedBone Press novel and about African diaspora and queer participation in southern African American communities; and *Stranger Inside*, a feature film by well-known African American lesbian filmmaker Cheryl Dunye and about Black lesbians and the prison industrial complex. These records are under-identified and, in the case of *Stranger Inside*, mis-identified. A subject heading for *Carry the Word* still includes the term "homosexuality," regarded by scholars to be a strictly medical and pathologizing label (Foucault; Queer Students Alliance 27).

Title	Author; Publisher	Subject Headings
<i>Carry the Word</i>	Steven G. Fullwood, Reginald Harris, & Lisa C. Moore RedBone Press, Vintage Entity Press	American literature -- African American authors -- Bibliography Gays' writings, American -- Bibliography Lesbians' writings, American -- Bibliography Bisexuals' writings, American -- Bibliography Transgender people's writings, American -- Bibliography Homosexuality and literature -- United States -- Bibliography African American authors -- United States -- Interviews Gay authors -- United States -- Interviews Lesbian authors -- United States -- Interviews
<i>Erzulie's Skirt</i>	Ana-Maurine Lara RedBone Press	Families -- Dominican Republic -- Fiction Women -- Dominican Republic -- Fiction
<i>love conjure/blues</i>	Sharon Bridgforth RedBone Press	No subject headings
<i>Stranger Inside</i>	Cheryl Dunye HBO Home Video	Reformatories for women -- Drama

Table 1.

The challenges of the library catalog are in many cases symptomatic of systemic problems within an increasingly anti-professional LIS field that devalues library workers, casting them as technical assistants rather than critical practitioners (Feinberg; Samek). The Libraries can remedy this on a local level and model a response to widespread problems of access generated by a lack of self-reflectiveness within the profession. By acknowledging that a catalog is not neutral and redressing the erasure of Black diasporic lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender materials by the current absence of information organization tools, library professionals can counteract anti-professional claims to objectivity in LIS and take a rightful role in critical engagement with knowledge organization's production of meaning (Dunbar; Olson & Schlegl). Melanie Feinberg suggests information organization requires that library professionals take up a critical practice: "an inclusive approach to information system design might involve the definition and justification of a particular stance toward the information, as appropriate for the use context of a particular system. Instead of one domain to be discovered, I submit that there are multiple domains to be created." Responding to this call for active creation of multiple contexts, with a focus on self-defined contexts for materials by historically marginalized communities, will articulate the value to the University of library professionals' work.

Infrequent local catalog intervention reinforces the identity of library professionals as interchangeable technicians. Because it is not locally controlled, WorldCat as a standard search interface for an increasing number of university catalogs exacerbates existing catalog problems. Biases in computer systems, "if the system becomes a standard in the field," can become "pervasive," Batya Friedman and Helen Nissenbaum observe. A centralized catalog may also be more difficult to change: "Unlike in our dealings with biased individuals with whom a potential victim can negotiate, biased systems offer no equivalent means for appeal" (Friedman & Nissenbaum 22). The creation of the BQSC emphasizes the critical work of librarians.

The BQSC ultimately enables a radical transformative reading practice. Categories, context, and information organization form the core of Richardson's proposed methodology for reading a Black queer subject:

[A] different kind of Black women's history will come into focus if research brings a Black queer subject into full view. [...] In order to study Black female subjects who are not feminine and feminine Black female subjects whose sexuality is not produced solely in relation to men—in other words, subjects whose gender is not predicted by biological sex (femininity not assumed for female bodies)—analyses must take into consideration the way categories of gender and desire are produced for raced subjects. There is no telling what can be accomplished from breaking secrets and telling other truths. ("No More Secrets" 73)



Richardson calls on scholars to redefine the categories of gender and sexuality as well as to examine “the way categories of gender and desire are produced for raced subjects.” LIS professionals must claim their responsibility in this and related scholarly discussions in order to support and collaborate in a critical practice that works towards liberatory information systems that do not oppress or marginalize.

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