

## Introduction

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THE FALL 2003 ISSUE of *RBM* included an article entitled “RBMS, Special Collections, and the Challenge of Diversity: The Road to the Diversity Action Plan” by Julie Grob, Chair of the RBMS Task Force on Diversity. In it she stated, “Since its debut in 1986, neither *RBM* nor *RBML* [*Rare Books and Manuscript Librarianship*, the predecessor to *RBM*] has ever published a single article on racial and ethnic collections, despite awareness of the lack of diversity in the section and the occurrence of pre-conference sessions on ethnic collections ... Marvin Taylor (*RBM* co-editor, 2000–2003) says that the editorial board discussed devoting an entire issue to the topic of diversity and that they passed along the suggestion to current editor Richard Clement.”<sup>1</sup> Since the appearance of Grob’s article, Rick Clement has seen to it that articles related to cultural diversity and special collections have been included in the journal, but this Fall 2007 issue responds to Marvin Taylor’s earlier suggestion to Rick and is a milestone in *RBM*’s continuing commitment to diversity: an entire issue devoted to the topic.

How did this issue come about? One of the recommendations of the RBMS Task Force on Diversity was to establish an RBMS Diversity Committee, which met for the first time in 2005. At one of its early meetings, the newly formed committee, of which I (Penny Welbourne) was a member, discussed ways in which diversity could be promoted as a value to RBMS members. Because I also served on the Editorial Board of *RBM*, I volunteered to suggest that the board consider publishing an issue of *RBM* on the subject of special collections that promote themes related to diversity. The board and its editor thought it was a fine idea, with one condition: I would agree to assume the role of “guest editor” and be responsible for initiating the endeavor and seeing it through to fruition. The task for me was made possible when my fellow RBMS Diversity Committee member, Kathleen Burns, agreed to act as Co-Guest Editor.

1. Julie Grob, “RBMS, Special Collections, and the Challenge of Diversity,” *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Cultural Heritage*, 4, no. 2 (2003): 90–91.

In order to create a framework around which we would develop the issue, Kathleen and I spent considerable time defining what diversity meant to us, before even beginning to decide upon possible contributors. We both agreed that, in terms of subject matter, we wanted to represent diversity in its broadest context, extending beyond the boundaries of race and ethnicity to include sexual orientation, cultural differences, disability, and political and social ideologies. In addition, we felt that the representative collections, themselves, should be diverse: from different areas of the country; supported by various types of sponsoring agencies; including digital as well as print materials; with holdings in both archives and libraries; small as well as large collections. Potential authors were identified and invited to make contributions to this issue of *RBM* in light of the significant work they have accomplished in collecting and disseminating information that promotes the reality of diversity in cultures, ethnic groups, socioeconomic backgrounds, health, and sexuality. They were asked to address theoretical as well as practical issues relating to acquisition and collection development; access to and use of the collection; conservation and preservation; security; fundraising and donor relations; the impact of electronic communication and data storage; exhibition preparation; legal and ethical issues.

We are pleased with the results that we have received from the seven contributing authors, and the fact that with their assistance, we were able to meet so many of the goals that we set for ourselves. Of paramount importance, we hope that we have provided for you, the reader, an opportunity to share in our discovery of some of the very different ways in which special collections are being used to document and promote diversity.

The issue opens with an article by Patricia Buck Dominguez, Humanities Bibliographer, and Joe A. Hewitt, University Librarian Emeritus, describing a major digital library initiative, *Documenting the American South* (DocSouth) undertaken by the University Library at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The online site provides access to books, diaries, posters, artifacts, letters, oral history interviews, and songs, and is divided into ten thematic collections, one of which—the North American Slave Narratives—is discussed in detail in the article. Dominguez and Hewitt trace the evolution and use of the collection; assess selection and description practices; and consider the appropriateness and suitability of folding collaborative theme-based digital projects under the umbrella of academic research libraries.

Joan Krizack, University Archivist and Head, Special Collections Department, details a program, “Documenting Diversity,” that has been established at Northeastern University Libraries to identify, locate, secure, and make accessible the most important and at-risk historical records of some of Boston’s “grassroots”

community organizations serving African Americans, Chinese, gays and lesbians, and Latinos. Krizack describes the joys and challenges of the project and provides reflections and suggestions for those who would attempt to replicate the project elsewhere.

Loretta Parham, the CEO/Library Director of the Robert W. Woodruff Library, describes a collection that is in the very throes of being developed relating to one historic individual: the Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers located at the Robert W. Woodruff Library of the Atlanta University Center for Morehouse College. Saved from public auction at the proverbial 11th hour on June 12, 2006, by a coalition of public and private interests, this collection's acquisition history serves as a testament to the importance of establishing wide-ranging partnerships with business, education, government, and civic leadership to maintain critical cultural heritage collections close to and rooted in the communities that generated them.

In "Collecting Anarchy: Continuing the Legacy of the Joseph A. Labadie Collection," Julie Herrada, the collection's curator, describes the growth of one of the largest collections of social protest literature, archives and ephemera, a collection that covers the many flavors of radical politics and brings together materials documenting anarchism, alternative sexuality, labor history, and the political views of the extreme right and left. Among other issues, Herrada explores how relationships can be built with radical, underground, and anti-authoritarian individuals and groups.

The author of the fifth article, Laurie Block, is the primary force behind the Disability History Museum, a unique digital resource that includes a library of primary source materials related to disability history that have been gathered from libraries and private collections across the country. Ms. Block, who came to the project with a background in documentary film production, addresses how disability history fits within broader historical studies and humanities research and shares the development strategy, technical choices, and overall vision that have established the site as a premier research collection for this emerging field of study.

The final article, by Timothy B. Powell, University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, provides information about a project that is currently underway to create a digital archive based on traditional Ojibwe systems of knowledge. Powell's article reflects on the possibilities and difficulties that digital technology provides for representing indigenous texts and materials; probes the cultural biases that may inadvertently be woven through digital projects; and speculates on how special collections professionals, guided by communities, can build alternative interfaces and privilege alternative perspectives, linkages, and contexts.

In the past, the term “diversity” has most often been used to refer to differences between individuals that are immediately apparent (e.g., ethnicity and culture). Increasingly, however, it is being recognized that diversity encompasses any way in which people may not be the same. An excellent example of such an expanded definition characterizes diversity as “including and recognizing individual attributes and differences such as age, race, gender, religion, cultural heritage and ethnic background, as well as less visible characteristics such as personal background, functional expertise, thinking styles, sexual orientation or disability”<sup>2</sup>—i.e., human characteristics that generally can not be changed by the individual.

While laws can be passed to change the physical environment of people, legislation does little to change attitudes. Only knowledge and understanding can lead to genuine acceptance. The UNESCO Declaration of Cultural Diversity states that:

culture takes diverse forms across time and space. This diversity is embodied in the originality and plurality of the identities that characterize the groups and the societies that make up humanity. Because it makes for exchange and mutual enrichment between these identities which are themselves dynamic and increasingly composite, cultural diversity is a source of innovation and creativity ... It is the common heritage of humanity and should be recognized and affirmed for the benefit of present and future generations ... For this reason, heritage in all its forms must be preserved, enhanced and handed on to future generations as a record of human experience and aspirations, so as to foster creativity in all its diversity and to inspire genuine dialogue among cultures.

And who better to preserve those records than archivists, librarians, and others whose job it is to establish and maintain special collections?

We hope that the following articles will help inspire individuals who are involved with collecting and documenting the past, present, and future to see that they are in a particularly unique position to cultivate and promote knowledge and understanding of people with whom we share our immediate surroundings as well as the world around us. In so doing, we are helping ourselves and others—uncovering new perspectives, tapping other kinds of knowledge and experience that color and expand the cultural record, and ultimately broadening personal and professional preconceptions. That has certainly been the effect of our experience in dealing with the subjects and individuals that have come together to create this issue, and we trust it will do the same for you.

2. Yale University Library, Library Diversity Council (2007); [www.library.yale.edu/lhr/diversity/](http://www.library.yale.edu/lhr/diversity/) (5 September 2007).



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