Chronicling African American Women Students at the University of Iowa

Shawn Averkamp, University of Iowa

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/shawn_averkamp/2/
Introduction

“I didn’t do anything special,” said Lulu Merle Johnson, first African American woman to receive a Ph.D. from an Iowa institution, in a 1991 Des Moines Register article.1 This newspaper clipping, tucked away in the alumni vertical files, is one of the few traces of Johnson in the archives of The University of Iowa, her alma mater. It is just one of many traces of notable African American women featured in “African American Women Students at the University of Iowa 1910–1960” (http://digital.lib.uiowa.edu/aaws),2 a themed digital collection in the Iowa Digital Library containing a variety of digitized artifacts hand-selected from the Iowa Women’s Archives, the University of Iowa Archives, the State Historical Society of Iowa, and the African American Historical Museum and Cultural Center of Iowa. This article will outline the process involved in creating a digital collection using a non-traditional method of selection – starting with a concept rather than a collection – and will also highlight some of the lessons learned and questions raised by such a process.

On the whole, there is little documentation in the archives of women’s experiences, and what little that exists is often hidden within larger archival collections. Kären Mason, curator of the Iowa Women’s Archives (IWA), in describing the dearth of collections about women noted that “most people have never given a thought to their papers. This is especially true of women who cannot imagine they have ever done anything that merits remembering outside the home” and that “[t]hose who have not held prominent public roles tend to dismiss their lives as having little historical significance.”3 IWA attempts to fill some of these gaps in Iowa’s cultural record through targeted collection development, by committing resources to establishing and maintain-
Students’ digital collection is not the African American Women’s Collections. While choices made for high-producing the descriptive metadata environments by carefully considering support virtual collection environments, it can be difficult to provide the justification for such focused attention to “boutique” collections.

Fortunately, the promise of a critical mass of digitized cultural heritage objects could support what archivist Bradley Westbrook has termed “virtual collections.” A virtual collection is a dynamic aggregation of digital objects that “originates from or is constructed by the end user” as the result of a repository database query. While archivists and curators do not create the collection through mediated selection, they can “develop the information environment in which users can construct virtual collections.”4 For instance, supposing the entirety of the University of Iowa Archives’ materials were digitized and described at item-level, a search of that digital repository for the subject “Lulu Merle Johnson” would produce a virtual collection of artifacts about this unrecognized Iowa trailblazer. Obviously, there will never be enough resources to digitize and describe everything to item-level, but institutions can support virtual collection environments by carefully considering the descriptive metadata choices made for high-production digitization projects. While the African American Women Students’ digital collection is not by definition a virtual collection, it mimics a possible virtual collection environment by aggregating artifacts from many different collections through single access points.

In 2007, the University of Iowa School of Library and Information Science (SLIS) received a grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) to train 20 students in digital librarianship over the course of three years. SLIS partnered with University of Iowa Libraries’ Digital Library Services department (DLS) and other organizations on campus to place students in project-based work fellowships with professional mentors. This digital project was designed by the DLS metadata librarian as a fellowship project to teach the fundamentals of digital project planning, digitization, metadata creation, collection display, and promotion. The project was also intended to produce a proof-of-concept for digital humanities research by creating an online environment for interpreting and contextualizing primary source materials, rather than just providing access. Because the labor was grant-funded, this allowed for some freedom to experiment with alternative selection and display methods.

Selection

Inspired by University of Iowa alumni Richard Breaux’s research on housing obstacles faced by African American women at the University of Iowa, the metadata librarian decided to use the body of primary sources referenced in Breaux’s article, “Maintaining a home for girls: The Iowa Federation of Colored Women’s Clubs at the University of Iowa 1919–1950,”5 as a springboard for selecting materials for a themed digital collection on African American women’s experiences at the University of Iowa. Breaux’s research had uncovered a wealth of important primary source materials which he thoroughly described in his notes. Many of these materials existed physically in collections that would never receive item or page-level description (if digitized at all), such as newspapers, university administration correspondence, and alumni vertical files.

First, primary sources referenced in the article were inventoried and evaluated on their appropriateness, availability for digitization, and physical accessibility. Some of these, such as correspondence between members of the Iowa Federation of Colored Women’s Clubs (IFCWC) and the University of Iowa president’s office, were immediately available for digitization and were given high priority for inclusion in the digital collection. Other sources, such as weekly sorority society columns in the (microfilm-only) Iowa Bystander African American newspaper, were not as readily available for digitization but their subject appropriateness and limited physical accessibility were such that they were also given high, but secondary priority. After it became apparent that a digital collection composed of these materials alone would not be very substantial, the archivist of the University Archives and the curator of IWA were consulted to help find additional materials. Also, the scope of the digital collection was expanded to in-
clude notable African American women alumni from the time period covered in Breaux’s article up to an event in University of Iowa history that garnered national attention, the election of Dora Martin as the first African American homecoming queen. After a suitable list was compiled, digitization began for readily available materials, and permissions were pursued for those materials not immediately available for digitization.

**Digitization**

This project was undertaken with the understanding that digitization would not be for preservation purposes, but for access and discovery and with the hopes that some day funds would be available to pursue full-scale digitization of yearbooks, the Iowa Bystander newspaper, and meeting minutes. With this in mind, most of the materials were excerpted, in a sense. Only applicable yearbook pages, newspaper articles, and pages from meeting minutes were scanned. While the oral histories included in this collection were part of a full collection digitization, there were no immediate plans for online access, and so in keeping with the narrow focus of the collection, Arlene Morris Roberts’ and Dora Martin Berry’s oral histories were excerpted to highlight just their experiences at The University of Iowa. Because of preservation concerns, scans of the minutes of the IFCWC were made from local preservation photocopies rather than the originals, which are housed two hours away at the State Historical Society in Des Moines, Iowa. Many of the materials drawn from the vertical files were also photocopies rather than originals, and while the most of the originals could be found somewhere in the library, it was decided in the interest of time to scan the photocopies. The choice to scan surrogates rather than originals did not, however, excuse any cutting of corners. Digitization followed local best practices for quality and preservation. Archival tiffs for all images and text were created at 600 dpi in 24-bit color for all materials 8½” by 11” and under and at 300 dpi for larger materials. Jpegs were...
subject headings were assigned by decade, and geographic subject headings were assigned following the Getty Thesaurus for Geographic Names (TGN) vocabulary and syntax. While not all materials were drawn from physical collections in the Iowa Women’s Archives, the intellectual content and descriptive metadata focus were considered enough to warrant their inclusion in IWA’s African American Women in Iowa Digital Collection. This conceptual relation was reflected in the Digital Collection (DC.Relation.IsPartOf) field of each item to allow discoverability within this larger digital collection. The physical location of each item is also clearly listed in the metadata to prevent any.
confusion should the user want to pursue the physical artifact. All of these fields are mapped to Dublin Core for integration with the Library’s federated search environment and for harvesting by Open Archives Initiative (OAI) metadata aggregators.

Interface and Value-Enhancements

The Iowa Digital Library uses a template for the majority of its digital collection splash pages in order to maintain a consistent search and discovery experience for users, but the focus of this collection on a specific topic rather than a specific archival collection necessitated its own boutique interface. The metadata librarian and the graduate fellow worked together to choose a format that would best showcase the selected materials and subject matter. After reviewing a variety of other institutions’ boutique digital collections, a timeline format was chosen. A webpage was created for each event along the timeline. Within each webpage, related digital objects are grouped by genre and linked to the Iowa Digital Library’s CONTENTdm digital asset management system via canned searches (Figure 4). Within CONTENTdm, users can view individual digital objects and create their own custom searches of the collection. Built-in OCR (optical character recognition) allows for enhanced keyword searchability of all text objects and oral history transcriptions.

Figure 4. Screen shot of an event page for the 1946 desegregation of the University of Iowa dormitories.
A brief description of each event also includes canned repository searches for each alumna featured. Using canned searches rather than permanent URLs to link from the interface to the repository allows not only the ability to link to multiple objects with one click, but opens up the possibility of expanding collection “holdings” with little to no effort. Careful adherence to local best practices for constructing personal and corporate names assures that any digital objects relating to the collection’s featured alumna, sororities, or clubs added to the Iowa Digital Library in the future will be included in repository results lists generated through the boutique collection interface. Because search URLs can change over time due to repository system upgrades or updates to controlled vocabulary terms, special consideration must given to maintaining the persistency of the canned search URLs. Since the collection launched in February 2008, the Iowa Digital Library upgraded its CONTENTdm repository system, resulting in a change to its URL path. Canned search URLs in all Iowa Digital Library boutique collections were updated to reflect these repository changes.

A number of secondary resources were consulted throughout the process of building this digital collection, and it was decided to include links to these resources on the collection website, both on the applicable timeline event pages and on a separate “Related Resources” page. Effort was made to link out to freely accessible versions of the resource when possible or to the bibliographic record that would be most useful to the site’s primary audience, in most cases the University of Iowa Libraries’ InfoHawk catalog record.

Conclusion

This collection demonstrates the benefits of controlled item-level description for facilitating discovery through virtual collection environments. The experimental nature of this project along with its purpose as a teaching tool inevitably raised questions. Is there a place in mass digitization projects for selective item-level description? How can institutions best set priorities for directing limited resources to item-level description? How can institutions leverage both the research that grows from use of their archival collections as well as the organizational knowledge of the archivists who maintain those collections to guide selection of materials for item-level description? Can these local domain experts’ research and knowledge be repurposed in some way to create more efficient workflows for descriptive metadata creation? Just as targeted collection development such as that practiced by the Iowa Women’s Archives can assure that women’s stories are included in the physical cultural record, focused efforts on descriptive metadata practices can assure that they are discoverable in the digital.

Endnotes