

The Black Cultural Center Library at Purdue University: An Interview with Librarian Jamillah R. Gabriel

by

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Black Cultural Center at Purdue University in West Lafayette, Indiana (a department with the Division of Diversity and Inclusion) is an 18,500-square foot building designed to capture the vigor of African-American culture and the spirit of traditional African architecture. The building was opened in June 1999.

The following interview was conducted in March 2016 with Jamillah R. Gabriel, Librarian at the Black Cultural Center Library at Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana.

IMZ: Thank you Jamillah R. Gabriel for this interview.

IMZ: In my review of your bio, I see similarities in our background (California, graduate of San Jose State University, etc.) which perhaps point to an attraction for working in a cultural center/library focused on the African American experience and the experiences of African people around the world.

JRG: Having been regularly exposed to institutions such as the California African American Museum and the African American Museum and Library at Oakland really have shaped my idea of the kind of work I wanted to do.

IMZ: How long have you been the Librarian at the Black Cultural Center Library, and the African American Studies liaison with the Purdue University Libraries?

JRG: I have been the librarian here since June 2013, and the fourth one to hold this position since the library's inception.

IMZ: In regards to reference questions, have you seen trends, and if so, what are the major topics being explored?

JRG: I have not noticed any particular trends as far as topics are concerned. Reference questions tend to run the gamut. I am currently helping two researchers find information about segregation at Purdue, and African American male teachers. But I do get a number of questions specifically about Black life on campus historically.

IMZ: During this time, I assume from my past experience at the Ralph J. Bunch Library and Media Center of the Ralph J. Bunch Center for African American Studies at UCLA (1992-2006) that there may have been some challenges for the library, if this is also true of Purdue, what were the major issues and how were they resolved?

JRG: An ongoing issue is getting funding for paraprofessional staffing. We do employ several student assistants, but the library would truly benefit from an experienced library paraprofessional who can assist with cataloging, processing, ordering, and various other technical and administrative duties. While I am one of many librarians on campus, I am virtually a solo librarian here at the BCC, and am tasked with juggling both professional and paraprofessional duties to keep the library running adequately. Another issue has been the lack of technology available in the library such as smart rooms and tablets for student use. We are currently exploring different options for adding technology in the library.

IMZ: The Black Cultural Center Library at Purdue University with its special collection of over 7,000 books, journals, and media is rather unique in academe, although Cornell University's Africana Studies & Research Center has the John Henrik Clarke Africana Library, and at UCLA there is the Ralph J. Bunch Library and Media Center via the Ralph J. Bunch Center for African American Studies. In terms of this uniqueness, do public expectations for the success of the Black Cultural Center Library at Purdue University exceed the possibilities of its aim?

JRG: I do think there is sometimes an expectation for the library to have any and every thing written about the African Diasporic experience, but we are still a growing library with fewer resources at our disposal than the other libraries on campus, which are all part of the Purdue University Libraries system.

The BCC Library is independent of that system, although we do share resources (e.g. library catalog, databases, etc.) and work in collaboration with PUL. Additionally, my position is a joint appointment between the BCC and PUL, and one of my responsibilities is as the African American Studies liaison with collection development oversight. So I am always mindful of duplicating resources between the two libraries which means that some things that are in PUL will not be in the BCC Library collection. We are also often expected to have information about all past African American entities on campus (e.g. clubs, faculty and staff, etc.), but as the library is a component of the cultural center, what we save and preserve primarily pertains to the BCC although some items also speak to Black life on the Purdue campus in general.

Because the BCC serves the Purdue Community and the greater Lafayette community at-large, the BCC Library sometimes acts as a public and school library, in addition to being an academic library that serves faculty and students. So there is an expectation that the Library can meet the needs of several different demographics, which is a difficult challenge to meet, but one we are always striving toward.

IMZ: I see from the Purdue University web-site that the Black Cultural Center is involved in a digital and historical archives project, can you tell us how that began, what its content contains (in general), and what is its function or purpose?

JRG: The archives project was initiated a few years ago by a former BCC Program Manager in an effort to preserve and increase access to the archives that had been collected since the opening of the BCC in 1969. When I came on as librarian, having had archival training, I assumed responsibility for the project which is a collaboration with the University Archives to digitize and catalog all of the BCC's archives on an ongoing basis. We have also embarked on another similar project which involves documenting the BCC's art collection of over 300 artifacts and art pieces which will also be made available online in a virtual museum.

IMZ: The public library system has generally embraced the idea of a subject focus on the African American experience via the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture (a research library of the New York Public Library), the African-American Research Library and Cultural Center in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, the African American Museum and Library at Oakland in Oakland, California, and several locations in the U.S. However, academe has been slow in implementing such a focus, with the exception of Purdue, UCLA, and Cornell. Do you see this as a problem, especially when there are masters and doctoral programs in African American Studies throughout the U.S.?



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JRG: I had not recognized this as a problem before, but I would agree that the public sector has embraced the idea of such libraries much quicker than academia. Unfortunately, I think the responsibility will ultimately fall on African American research centers and Black cultural centers to bring awareness of the importance of these special libraries to their respective university campuses in order to begin to see a shift in the current trend.

I would add that Indiana University Bloomington's Black Cultural Center also has a library and librarian on staff.

IMZ: What is your advice for those wishing to be a librarian in the arena of African American Studies in which the library acts as the hub of activity at a university?

JRG: As was mentioned before, there are opportunities in both academic and public libraries but what all of them have in common is an underlying mandate to serve the African American community in whatever form that presents itself. So a librarian wanting to work in this arena should be proactive about such things as gaining experience in creating specialized programming for various demographics, building a knowledge of books and materials that cater to an African American audience, and making meaningful connections with stakeholders both on and off campus.

IMZ: Thank you Jamillah for this interview, is there any parting words or wisdom you would like to share with our readers? If so, this is your opportunity.

JRG: Libraries such as this one are very special places, a rare breed, as the number of special collections on Africana that exist in academia are few and far between. The BCC Library is even more unique because of its connection to the Black Cultural Center. I am grateful for and energized by the opportunity to work in such an enriching environment that values and promotes the culture and history of the African Diaspora.



Jamillah R. Gabriel (jgabrie@purdue.edu) holds an Associate in Arts in English from Cerritos College, Bachelor of Arts in Black Studies and Journalism from California State University Long Beach, and a Master of Library and Information Science from San Jose State University. She is currently pursuing a second master's degree in museum studies. She has 14 years of experience in academic, public, and special libraries; Gabriel has worked extensively in acquisitions, serials, cataloging collections.