Inclusive Collection Development Doesn't Stop at the Statement: Access and Reference Services at Schlesinger Library as Case Study

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Introduction

It's arguable that the heart of a university is its libraries. They acquire, preserve, organize, restore, and make accessible its vital information resources for the university's students, faculty, staff, visiting scholars, and community partners, and optimally, create space for new knowledge to emerge. The Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America sits at the core of one of Harvard University's nodes, the Harvard Radcliffe Institute. Opened under the auspices of Radcliffe College in 1943, the Schlesinger Library is a research library with a curatorial focus on collections related to the history of women and gender diverse[1] people. Unlike other libraries on campus, the Schlesinger Library holds archives collected with the recognition that without intentional efforts, there would be no space to recognize, name, and study the breadth and scope of women's histories. The library's first collection was a gift of manuscript material from suffragist Maud Wood Park, and over time, this has grown to include over three thousand archival collections and thousands of books, pamphlets, zines, journals, and other materials.[2]

In 2025, amidst a flurry of Executive Orders from the federal government; the attempted defunding of governmental agencies like the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Institute of Museum and Library Sciences; and the concomitant widespread interruption of services, programming, and integral grant awards, many libraries, archives, and museums are facing existential threats (K. Jensen 2025). Within this landscape, the Schlesinger Library's revised collection development strategy and its express commitment to reparative archival practice[3] remain true to the library's roots and stand as models for navigating the challenges of regressive policies and anticipatory compliance. This article provides an overview of how putting the revised strategy in practice within the realm of access and reference services holds us grounded in the concept of access with accountability. In the context of digital humanities work, Roopika Risam explains that access without accountability creates a situation in which "archives are opened but not contextualized, where stories are extracted from communities but not returned to them, where knowledge circulates but the people who shaped it are left behind. It is access that takes, not access that gives back" (Risam 2025). Collection strategies have historically only reflected society's dominant structures. Therefore, to practice access

with accountability, it's important for people using collections to see themselves and their stories reflected in cultural institutions, even with the recognition that archival silences will prevent us from fully recovering the breadth of historical context (Dempsey 2018).

We remain in solidarity with the communities we not only serve but are active members of. Therefore, we believe it is important to note our own identities as library workers who are also recent transplants to New England and to working in academia. One of us is a white, nonbinary person who grew up in rural Pennsylvania, and one of us is a first-generation, South Asian American cisgender woman who most recently called the Upper Midwest a home. Our positionality is notable because our experiences with being marginalized inform our work in access and reference services at the Schlesinger Library and further underscore how important the library's mission is to our collective well-being. Our positionality is relevant to our work as research services professionals. According to the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) guidelines, a special collections professional "[p]ossesses cultural and linguistic competencies appropriate for their collections and user communities" (ACRL 2017). Subject matter expertise, professional training, and our lived experiences contribute to how we engage researchers with collections.

Collection development is an integral tool for inclusion in libraries and archives. Inclusion is a core value articulated in library and archival sciences today, encoded both at the curricular level for incoming information professionals as well as in diverse professional guidelines. We argue that inclusive collecting strategies are not a new outcome of contemporary DEI policies, but rather the result of a long struggle in the profession. Such strategies are inherently political, because they are grounded in remaining accountable to the communities from which materials are being collected. By providing equitable access and reference support, we bring these collections to the attention of researchers. In working with the public, we provide critical context, demonstrate care for these materials, and tell the stories of so many who were historically and intentionally silenced.

We argue that anti-DEI backlash incorrectly labels the work of increasing diversity, equity, and inclusion in library spaces as a contemporary project originating in the post-2020 era, overlooking decades of work by library professionals and institutions committed to reparative collection development practices. This article was written during a period of immense instability for both the United States and other countries throughout the western hemisphere, with lasting repercussions for countries categorized under the umbrella term "Global South." Ongoing attacks on intellectual freedom are often veiled as accusations against DEI training and labeled as exclusively affiliated with one major political party. These accusations are coupled with demands to remove historical content regarding marginalized populations, including Indigenous, Black, Latine, Asian, Pacific Islander, and disabled communities, as well as individuals who identify as LGBTQIA+, from major cultural heritage sites.

Case Study: Access and Research Services and Inclusive Collection Development

Questions regarding who gets to read what, when, where, and how undergird our respective roles as access services coordinator (Madeleine) and reference librarian (Mimosa) at a storied special collections library. While the Schlesinger Library does not have an official direct reporting line to Harvard Library, it houses the archival records for Radcliffe College, a women's college that was later fully incorporated into Harvard University in 1999 (Maiorana 2025, 207). We support access to analog and digital archival materials alongside printed and

published items, as well as the discovery and use of items found in subscription databases and other online resources made possible through the university library's central administration and other partner repositories. Conducting research with archival materials within the context of a non-circulating collection complicates access and use for researchers new to working with these types of materials. Therefore, collaborating with Schlesinger Library colleagues across departments is key to the success of how we can uphold equitable access for hundreds of researchers each year. While we do not participate directly in the curatorial work of acquisitions and donor relations, practicing inclusive collection development cross-departmentally holds us accountable to the individuals whose lives are represented by the materials held at our library.

Connecting our collections and subject matter expertise to researchers' daily lives is part and parcel of our efforts to create connections to resources, either through their time spent in our reading room or via remote research options. Unlike some sister libraries on campus, the Schlesinger Library is open to all members of the public and does not require one to have a specific research project in order to use collection materials. Such boundaries, perceived and real, are particularly difficult to navigate when one is new to doing research with primary sources, and those boundaries can be exacerbated by the long practice of both actual exclusion and de facto segregation that has taken place at such institutions (Malkiel 2013, 33; Moseley 1973, 216; Cooke 2017, 47–48).

Concurrent with the library's desire to be welcoming to all researchers is a dedicated effort to increase the depth of collection materials representing communities that have been historically, intentionally, and traditionally marginalized. Rather than reify identities and the study of them as fixed practices, particularly for materials related to the study of and/or by women and gender diverse people, collection development is flexible and expansive. Delivering a paper at the Society of American Archivists conference in 1972, Schlesinger Library Curator and historian Eva Moseley described how the first donation of papers by Radcliffe alumna and suffragist Maud Wood Park led to a concerted push by other historians to expand the collection more broadly. Moseley's later efforts focused upon acquiring items attesting to the many facets of women's lives (Moseley, 216–217). In 1981, Curator of Printed Books Barbara Haber spoke to a reporter from the *Wilson Library Quarterly* about her desire to thoroughly document the social history of American women: "Before, women's history was suffrage or other social reform . . . [and now] the fun for me in developing this collection has been to expand the definition of what women's history is" (Gold, 755). Within the same article, the author notes the paucity of primary source materials documenting the lives of ordinary women. Researchers resorted to scouring diaries of upper-class women for trace mentions of servants or factory workers. Attempts to read between and beneath the lines of the written record could only go so far without active intervention by library staff to intentionally expand and diversify their holdings.

Over decades, curators at the Schlesinger Library have steadily adapted its collection development strategy, recognizing that "the passage of the 19th amendment did not ensure voting rights for all American women" and that collections held "have not adequately reflected the lives, experiences, and concerns of all women in America" (Harvard Radcliffe Institute, "Collection Development Strategy," 2025). One of the authors of this article began her work at the Schlesinger Library as an associate curator and alongside the current Curatorial Team, studied the variations of language used in diverse collection development statements across peer institutions with significant holdings of materials of, by, or about women and gender diverse people. Shadowing colleagues, observing how relationships gradually grew between

donors and the library, and noting examples of reparative archival work conducted elsewhere revealed the necessity of directly contending with the silences and gaps evinced by collection materials. Only through intentional collection development practices would we be able to address the omissions of those considered less than human.

The work of redress and reconciliation never was and never will be neutral. Jarrett M. Drake notes that the nation's original archives, once assembled in the United States, were not in support of a new nation with records that would be accessible to all. Rather, they consisted of "collected family papers of the wealthy merchants, enslavers, and politicians who funded these operations" (Drake 2019). The formation of publicly available archives in the United States dates back to the end of Reconstruction during the nineteenth century. Southern states needed a readily accessible method for accessing material documenting and commemorating lineages of Confederate soldiers who had died (Drake). Noticeably absent from the nascent records of publicly available archives in these Southern states are the names and lives of enslaved and later freed Black women, for whom authority records would not be created (Drake).

The examples Drake raises resonate with the history of Harvard University and of Schlesinger Library's collections. The institutional frame that surrounds the Schlesinger Library is shot through with the legacy of slavery. Wealthy plantation owners, shipbuilders, industrialists, and their respective descendants fueled the growth of Harvard University through profits earned either directly or indirectly through the forced removal of Native people and the enslavement of African men, women, and children (The Presidential Committee on the Legacy of Slavery 2022, 7–8). Despite being a repository focused upon women and gender diverse people, the Schlesinger Library invariably collected materials in its earliest decades that originated with white, cisgender, and upper-class women of the American northeast.

Creating and acting upon a more inclusive collection development strategy meant redefining inclusive processes. Through conversations with various library departmental heads, and further reflection and drafting, the Schlesinger Curatorial Team (comprising three full-time curators, including a curator for Gender and Society, a curator for Collections on Ethnicity and Migration, and a curator of African American and African Diasporic Collections) used their unique expertise to articulate a statement that includes an "Areas for Growth" section. This section of the collection development strategy illustrates *how* the work to more effectively incorporate voices and experiences that have been historically struck out of the archival record would be accomplished. The penultimate section of the document is titled "Topics of Interest" and identifies people, groups, associations, and subjects such as Latine lives, transnational feminism, working class women and families' lives, and disability rights and justice, among other topics noted as areas of growth (Harvard Radcliffe Institute, "Collection Development Strategy"). The generous, careful approach that infuses the Curatorial Team's words was crafted through ongoing consultations with library staff to better address what might be missing.

Actionable steps towards reparative archival work include the normalization of acquisitions that genuinely engage with marginalized communities (Hughes-Watkins 2018, 5). This renewed, collective commitment to justice requires a dedicated collection development strategy. An effective strategy will offer pathways for broadly acquiring materials while cross-departmentally reckoning with the ongoing access and outreach mechanisms needed to correct our incomplete record.

Defining Political Work: The Long Struggle for DEI in Libraries and Archives

In the article "Respecting Privacy of Thought in DEI Training," author Kristin Antelman (2025) argues that contemporary DEI trainings serve political ends, but does not clearly define what is meant by the term political as it is used in the article. Being "political" could refer to taking actions or voicing ideas that are arguably attributable to the contested categories of "right" or "left." If this is the case, it is hard to imagine what would fall inarguably outside of the loose bounds of either category and become sufficiently depoliticized for discussion in the library as a workplace. Being "political" could also refer more narrowly to taking actions or voicing ideas that are in alignment with historically contingent party platforms. Under this definition, problems grow exponentially as one increases the time period under study. Even when examining one moment in time, this is intensely contested territory. For example, Antelman's argument was presented on the assumption that she was taking a depoliticized stance, but the authors of the "Open Letter to CRL from the academic wing of #CripLib" posit that Antelman's argument contains "recent far-right talking points to argue against DEI initiatives in libraries without an honest acknowledgement of the political stance the author is taking" (2025, para. 4).

Through the lens of the above definitions, it is debatable to what degree projects to increase diversity, equity, and inclusion in libraries have or have not been political. The time and context under examination would critically influence the debate. However, if being "political" refers to a relationship with power and its wielding in U.S. society (Oxford English Dictionary[4]), then it has always been a political project to create library spaces that value diversity, foreground inclusivity, and are equitably accessible to people of all races, ethnicities, classes, abilities, and genders. Importantly, this definition of political contextualizes the library profession's impulse towards claims of neutrality[5] as a political project as well (Schlesselman-Tarango 2016; Cifor and Wood 2017). These political projects have not exclusively existed in conflict (Chiu, Ettarh, and Ferretti 2021); however, overall, the former project is engaged with a critical examination of power while the latter predominantly serves as a cloaking device for the same (Schlesselman-Tarango 2017; Chiu, Ettarh, and Ferretti). Some librarians and archivists in certain contexts may feel comfortable denying or not engaging with the political nature of the profession. Those of us working in libraries with long-standing, often foundational, commitments to collecting from communities that have strategically been denied access to power are left with no such choice.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (capital DEI) work has been codified in corporate and institutional contexts over the last five years, and this form of DEI work was criticized early on in its development in the library profession.[6] The criticism was not about the focus on identity but rather the inclination of institutionalized DEI work to prioritize speed and performativity over substance (Berry 2021). While this contemporary codification of DEI is somewhat new, efforts to expand the bounds of who is welcome in the library and stretch library collections to encompass a wider epistemological breadth and depth has been the iterative work of librarians throughout U.S. history. The combined efforts of library workers, advocates of libraries in government, and community activists have transformed the American library into an enterprise committed to egalitarian principles (Graham 2002, 1–5). Diversity, equity, and inclusion have not always been values central to the profession (Graham, 1–5; Schlesselman-Tarango 2016), and we cannot take for granted that these ideals will always be valued by the profession in the future.

In the context of higher education, college and university libraries and special collections specifically have not always been inclusive spaces. The authors of this piece work at Harvard University where women students were prohibited from entering the Lamont Library until 1967 (Malkiel).[7] Prior to the construction of the Lamont Library, a section of Radcliffe College's *Handbook of the Library* from 1925 provided instructions for how Radcliffe students could use various parts of the Harvard Library and noted that one particular area of the library called "The Stack" "is not open to women after 6 P.M." (Records of the Radcliffe College Library, 18–19). In the late nineteenth century, women were able to apply for limited-term borrowing privileges at Harvard Library. At that time, a man could authorize that other individuals could check out books under his personal account. In some cases, they did so for a sister, a cousin, a secretary, and one individual's mother, as well as other women whose relation to them was not disclosed (Harvard College Library 1879–1899).

Historically, women's access to resources were *intentionally* circumscribed at Harvard and other educational institutions (Malkiel), and women's scholarship and intellectual outputs were deemed unworthy additions to archives and history books (Moseley; Zangrando 1973). Another example of intentional exclusion is what historian Margaret Rossiter called "the Matilda effect," "named for the 19th-century suffragist Matilda Joslyn Gage, to describe the age-old practice of attributing scientific achievements of women to their male colleagues" (Green 2025, para. 1). Women's eventual inclusion in the historical record was neither a matter of inevitability nor the natural course of mystical progress (Ulrich 2004, 10). It required *intentional* and direct confrontation with societal power via *political* intervention on behalf of women's rights activists, women's studies scholars, and their allies (Zangrando; Moseley).

According to Antelman, "It is not ethical to ask library workers to sit through training on topics that are politically charged, and that are not concretely related either to the work of the library or rules for workplace behavior" (435). At the Schlesinger Library, avoiding politically charged topics is an ontological impossibility. Staff must regularly describe, process, and make discoverable politically charged manuscript and published materials, particularly related to women and gender diverse individuals' confrontation with what Patricia Hill Collins terms the matrix of domination[8] in U.S. society (2009). Given the library's own history, contemporary discussions among Schlesinger Library staff regarding how to respectfully include and describe the records of nonbinary and transmasculine individuals and communities, for example, cannot be written off as newly activated theories inappropriately transplanted into the library context by post-2020 DEI initiatives. Rather, these discussions, held in the context of the curatorial department's work on the library's collection development strategy, are extensions of the Schlesinger Library's foundational efforts to expand the available corpus of archival resources to include gender identities traditionally excluded from the historical record.

Antelman argues, "Identity-centric trainings are politically partisan, and therefore inappropriate for the library" (435). Nuanced evaluations and critiques of what is termed "identity politics" exist and could be examined when considering how to appropriately implement DEI training in libraries.[9] However, in this instance, it seems Antelman is potentially implying that all DEI trainings should be banned because of the direct association with the Democratic party in the U.S., although the substance of this association is not clearly articulated. As Chiu, Ettarh, and Ferretti note, "[t]he methods by which to work neutrally in collection development are unclear" (62), and conducting informational training sessions for

staff related to the Schlesinger Library's collection development strategy becomes impossible if identity-centric trainings are entirely forbidden.

In May 2025, one of the authors of this essay collaborated with colleagues to create an informational session about the Schlesinger Library's history of collecting from trans* communities and individuals. This informational session, for which attendance was optional, was developed in support of the "Lesbian, queer, nonbinary, and trans* lives" area for growth in the Schlesinger Library's Collection Development Strategy. This event was not engaged with electoral politics in the way it seems Antelman concludes all DEI trainings must be. However, according to the definition of "political" used in this essay (referring to a relationship with power and its wielding in U.S. society), this learning opportunity was political. Importantly, it was just as political as a training would be if it was used as an opportunity to either actively deny gender diverse individuals' existence or to passively ignore these communities by presenting the library as a repository that only includes the records of cisgender women. At reparative archives, it is impossible for staff to not engage with the political role that identity plays in *everyone's* history.

Because the university serves as a legitimacy-granting apparatus in U.S. society, inclusion can be fraught for historically excluded (or historically present but de facto unrecognized) communities (Ulrich, 1–14; Berry).[10] Reparative archives housed at universities with a history of exclusivity perpetually exist between a rock and a hard place. This has been true throughout Radcliffe College's existence. As Malkiel explains in an account of the merger between Radcliffe College and Harvard,

> There was serious resistance to merger at Radcliffe, and it was not simply a function of institutional chauvinism. Skepticism of Harvard was well grounded in the reality of Harvard's history. Since 1948 Harvard had had one tenured position for a woman faculty member . . . Although there were a handful of women assistant professors, faculty members who were not tenured held little influence in the university, and there was no path to tenure from the assistant professor rank. Harvard had no women administrators. And the number of male undergraduates at Harvard was four times the number of Radcliffe women. There was reasonable cause to worry about submerging Radcliffe into a less-than-hospitable male university (199).

In *Yards and Gates: Gender in Harvard and Radcliffe History*, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich relays the results of the eventual submergence—confusion and a generalized misunderstanding of Radcliffe's history (1–14).

A parallel discordance is evident directly in the library work reparative archives undertake. For example, content that cannot be precisely described presents problems for inclusion in information organization infrastructures that seek to make university-owned or -licensed material discoverable through precise metadata interventions (Peimer 2015; Rawson 2018). For libraries with intentionally inclusive collection development strategies, these politically charged challenges that are inextricably related to identity must be constantly acknowledged in order for the work to be done at all.

Therefore, anti-DEI arguments that advocate for the implementation of a blanket ban on discussions of identity would effectively shut down all such reparative archival work. Such

a ban would prohibit the functioning of archives operating from a legacy of intentional inclusion of historically excluded communities. The threats to intellectual freedom cannot be understated. In effect, entire archival repositories would be censored and the range of what is deemed material of historical significance would narrow once again.

Blanket bans on discussion of identity are promoted in theory as a means of placing all individuals under the umbrella of a common humanity. However, it is essential to note that in practice, anti-DEI actions that attempt to censor content at cultural heritage and educational institutions are as focused on identity as any DEI action implemented by these institutions in recent years. The list of items the current presidential administration has labeled as inappropriate for inclusion in the Smithsonian's collections directly targets specific identity groups, such as LGBTQ+ individuals, descendants of enslaved individuals, people with disabilities, Latine community members, and immigrants (The White House 2025). Similarly, attempts at the school level to curtail the purchase and use of materials deemed as advancing critical race theory effectively prohibit books that even mention race, with the federal government threatening to cut funding to schools that incorporate "inappropriate" racial, sexual, or political content (Schwartz 2025).

Implementing Political Work: Supporting Inclusive Collection Development in Access and Research Services

The ACRL guideline that a special collections professional "[p]ossesses cultural and linguistic competencies appropriate for their collections and user communities" requires access services staff members to build a bridge between a repository's collection and all the diverse user communities who may be interested in accessing them (2017). This includes considerations regarding environmental accessibility, which Rawson (2009) states "is determined by 'the feel' of a space and the way a person is treated in that space" (127). This can include actions such as creating a social narrative[11] guide for visitors to review in advance of their visit (Hoyer and Pelaez 2024), making information available for locating single-user or gender-neutral bathrooms (Rawson 2009), maintaining a stock of tools to enhance physical accessibility in the reading room, and making researchers aware of the use of video surveillance (ACRL/RBMS Guidelines Regarding the Security of Special Collections Materials 2023).

Ideally, these are tactics to improve access that all archives should consider implementing in alignment with the ACRL Code of Ethics for Special Collections Librarians' guideline to "constantly strive to improve collections access for all users" (2020, Statement of Values para. 1). However, archives with a collection development strategy to acquire materials from specific communities have a particular responsibility to make their reading rooms comfortable spaces for individuals in those communities as a component of non-extractive collection development practice (Murphy 2025). Libraries can maintain a focus on providing access for all while also utilizing DEI training as a tool for gaining a better understanding of how to make targeted improvements to access for particular communities.

A multi-pronged approach that emphasizes not only acquisitions, but also effective advocacy, promotion, and rich, variable use of collections is necessary when it comes to reparative archival work (Hughes-Watkins, 10–11). One-on-one research consultations, small group demonstrations, and ongoing relational work with an array of campus and community partners are strategies employed by the library's Research Services staff as their efforts go beyond responding to standard reference questions. Advising researchers on how to locate, evaluate, use, and potentially re-use materials for original research is part of the circle of

reparative archival work that welcomes and includes diverse individuals into conversation with primary source materials.

Therefore, collection development strategy is not a matter of selection alone. Our practices extend beyond acquisitions to relational work with students, faculty, staff, donors, visiting researchers, and community partners, creating a foundation for sustainable collection development. In the recently released *Professional Competencies for Reference and User Services Librarians* from the Reference and User Services Association (RUSA), staff are encouraged to adequately assess the needs of researchers. Section B.1.3 states the necessity for staff to be "cognizant of their own cultural background and assumptions, and the racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds of the community" (n.d.).

In addition, the *Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers*, published by RUSA in 2023, re-affirms the value of equity, diversity, and inclusion as intrinsic to librarianship. Practitioners in the field recognize the power differential that arises between library workers and researchers and how it's incumbent upon the former to cultivate trust, build relationships, and move past the transactional nature of our workspaces for the sake of the latter (RUSA 2–3). Section 1's discussion about how to be inclusive emphasizes that library workers should advocate for equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility by crucially reflecting upon one's own implicit biases and how they impact reference interactions. What information professionals choose to share with researchers is as critical as the rhetorical power exerted by the process of archival description, which shapes how materials are made visible (or invisible); how one is welcomed (or not) into conversation with these materials; and most importantly, how naming of these materials, a practice contingent upon legacies privy to slippages of language, shapes perception of the histories they represent (Rawson 2018, 347).

The impact of naming, particularly with regard to who is seen and called by archival materials and the spaces that house them, is worth interrogating. Antelman writes about how the deputization of library staff to perform climate surveys, equity audits, and assessment of impact shifts organizational cultures from academic to bureaucratic, a need that is seemingly counter to the aims professed by industry standards (Antelman, 441). Such self-imposed censure allegedly prohibits one from sincerely engaging with their workplace for fear of their private thoughts negatively implicating them. Yet the self-surveillance Antelman writes about is far more intrinsic to the library profession and stretches back farther than the advent of contemporary DEI training. Scholar Jaime Ding's analysis of the service mentality and religious calling often adopted by library practitioners finds that the field lends itself to a form of self-surveillance, in which aspirations towards professionalization incorporate appeals to uphold whiteness (2024, 74). The hierarchy associated with "race and gender (with, in this case, white men at the pinnacle)" was mirrored in librarianship and placed stress upon library students to fulfill their role with the vigor of a religious calling while maintaining its mythical (and implicitly white) ethos (Ding, 71).

Peeling back the layers, we see that this history of how library professionals have upheld accreditation and standards as naturally occurring rather than socially constructed frameworks is a legacy we must wrestle with now. Holding ourselves accountable to the archival records created by staff, however imperfectly, would also mean permitting ourselves to interrupt the self-surveillance that accompanies professionalism, including the (false) equivocation of professionalism with depoliticized neutrality (R. Jensen 2006). An insistence upon privacy of thought does not contend with the context in which knowledge is created.

Ding explains that the concept of vocational awe that Fobazi Ettarh coined in her piece "Vocational Awe and Librarianship: The Lies We Tell Ourselves," plus the self-surveillance

that accompanies it, was not the accidental result of centuries-old patterns of behavior in libraries. Rather, it was an intentionally developed project enforced by academic library administrators, both at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) School of Library Service and throughout other institutions as a means of validating a field at risk of being over-feminized (Ding, 64, 75). Ettarh explains that vocational awe "refuses to acknowledge the library as a flawed institution," and that "when people of color and other marginalized librarians speak out, their accounts are often discounted or erased" (Ettarh 2018). Together, Ding and Ettarh's arguments situating self-surveillance as part and parcel of predominantly white organizations like libraries shatter the suggestion that privacy of thought is impacted through learning about inclusive practice. Self-censorship has been evident in library cultures for decades, but Antelman overlooks this history and places the blame on failed DEI initiatives and the power of peer pressure in training spaces (Antelman, 441). The antecedents of nominally held neutrality in libraries historically made such environmental stressors a common facet of the workplace.

Conclusion

Historian K.T. Ewing asks us to dream differently when it comes to libraries and archives. In her 2022 article "Fugitive Archives: Black Women, Domestic Repositories, and Hoarding as Informal Archival Practice," Ewing movingly describes her gradual understanding of and deep admiration for the seemingly idiosyncratic ways her grandmother and aunt have stored a lifetime's worth of memories. Such precious items are "buried in a tomb" of grief by the living who remain and "the perpetual mandate that Black women push through their emotions to face another day in a world that never stops for them" (Ewing, 49). The lack of time to process grief or care for oneself parallels a similar insufficiency for properly memorializing the people and places that made them who they are. This lack of records that fully describe, let alone name, the range of experiences of various marginalized communities is effectively a form of "blanking." As Sara Ahmed writes, "Blanking is how feminism became 'white feminism.' The word blank comes from white. Feminism became white not because Black and brown women were not there, speaking, knowing, creating, as feminists, but because we were blanked, not recorded being there" (Ahmed 2025).

Ahmed's comments are a response to "gender critical" feminists who have chosen to restrict the definition of woman based on sex assigned at birth rather than engaging with the long history of trans* and queer people who have historically been part of feminist spaces. Linking Ahmed and Ewing's writings, we see the possibility for imagining other ways to critique systemic oppression and refuse to ascribe importance based on dominant narratives (Zangrando 209–210). These disordered, unnamed records that remain after a lifetime of fragmented memory can easily become buried or inadequately reconciled when we do not intentionally consider the systems that organize them—and the systems that have failed them. Inclusive collection development is a means of naming and fulfilling the connections evinced by underrepresented histories. Recognizing that intentional descriptive work alone cannot fully contend with the silences and gaps inherent within institutional archives, it is thus even more incumbent upon library workers to continue incorporating inclusion and equity as core values throughout our practice. Incisive critique of past practices, mingled with stunning examples of incorrigible lives of those who cannot, could not, and will not fit neatly into depoliticized categories of what is deemed worthy of the historical record, is not only a matter

of justice. It points to a way forward, one that asks us to respond to the communities represented in our institution's collections while reckoning with the biases of imperfect tools.

Upholding reparative archival work is a means for addressing and correcting the exclusions found in the historical record. By promoting a more inclusive collection development strategy, we are also emphasizing the importance of maintaining access with accountability to the many individuals whose stories we are privileged to care for. In holding ourselves accountable, our jobs also become inherently political, contradicting narratives of neutrality within libraries and archives. Resorting to selective remembrances of a past that never actually existed for the sake of avoiding politically charged topics neglects the broader need for reckoning with difficult truths. We acknowledge that our institutions, however flawed, must be open to the crucial task of reorienting the stance of the collector and breaking apart their curio to build a sturdier vessel that honors the unassimilable.

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Endnotes

1   Gender diverse is "an umbrella term for those whose gender identity does not fully align with the sex they were assigned at birth" (Kidd 2023, 112).

2   Collection by the numbers as listed on the library website is only part of the picture.

3   As defined by the Society for American Archivists, "reparative archives" are "a collecting repository that intentionally focuses on historically underrepresented people."

4   As one *Oxford English Dictionary* definition for "political" states, "Relating to or concerned with public life and affairs as involving questions of authority and government."

5   "*Neutrality* is not always the specific term that is used to invoke this framework; the terms *objective* and *unbiased* are also used interchangeably in the library context to describe a lack of bias" (Chiu, Ettarh, and Ferretti 2021, 56).

6   See for example, Dorothy Berry's "The House Archives Built."

7   The Lamont Library was built in 1949 and specializes in serving Harvard's undergraduate students (Harvard Library Communications Office 2025).

8   "[M]atrix of domination: the overall organization of hierarchical power relations for any society" (Collins 2009, 320).

9   See, for example, "In the Ether: Neoliberalism and Entrepreneurial Woman" in Imani Perry's text *Vexy Thing: On Gender and Liberation* (2018) or Marquis Bey's *Black Trans Feminism* (2022)

10 In the introduction to *Yards and Gates: Gender in Harvard and Radcliffe History*, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich states, "[t]here have always been women at Harvard" (9), and in the zine "The House Archives Built," Berry "explore[s] how foundational concepts in special collections can serve as core elements in the continued ignorance and avoidance of Black history in our midst" (3).

11 "A social narrative is a document that explains what will happen when students visit a new place: it describes with words and pictures what will happen when students arrive, how many steps it is from the bus stop to the main entrance, who will welcome them to the building, what kinds of activities they will do, where they can eat, what the bathrooms look like, and more" (Hoyer and Pelaez, "It's So Liberating to Do the Work: Education in Archives Creates Space for People with Disabilities," 2024, 192–193).

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