



AFAS: African American Studies Librarians' Section  
Association of College and Research Libraries - ALA

ALA ACRL AFAS 20th Anniversary Program  
Saturday, June 16, 2001  
Westin St. Francis Hotel, San Francisco, CA

Dr. Stanton F. Biddle

Baruch College, The City University of New York

Good afternoon. Welcome to the 20th Anniversary meeting of the African American Studies Librarians' Section of ACRL, formerly known as the Black Studies Librarians' Discussion Group.

Last year when Dorothy Washington asked me to participate in the program today, I thought it would be a snap. All I would have to do is think back over the years, look through my files, and talk about the wonderful partnerships we have forged in our efforts to apply our skills as librarians to the field of African American Studies. Unfortunately my memory was not as reliable as I had anticipated, and my files were not as complete as I would have liked them to be. Therefore, I still had to do some research to come up with the facts upon which my discussion this afternoon will be based.

In her proposal for this session, Dorothy stated that the African American Studies Librarians' Section of ACRL continues to offer programs that address the needs and concerns of African American studies librarianship. Such programming has provided opportunities for librarians to increase their knowledge-base, share ideas and information, and develop professional skills in support of African American Studies, a relatively new discipline within the academy. However, as African American studies continues to gain academic respectability, librarians must continue to develop them to meet the challenge of more advanced researchers investigating the African American experience. Today's program provides an opportunity for us to consider past and present professional development activities and to chart directions for the future. We might also discuss opportunities for collaborative research projects between librarians and scholars in charting research agendas, developing curriculum, and creating research tools.

It is hard to believe that it has been two decades since the fall of 1980 when Jeff Jackson and Wendell Wray circulated a letter asking about our interest in starting a Discussion Group in ACRL to focus on Black Studies. Jeff Jackson was the head of the Afro-American Collection in the Hillman Library at the University of Pittsburgh and Wendell Wray was a professor on the faculty of Pitt's School of Library and Information Science.

Jeff's letter said in part:

*I am writing you in hope that you will join a discussion group which will be forming at the 1981 mid-winter meeting ALA in Washington D.C. within ACRL on Black Studies Librarianship.*

*As you are aware, there is no formal group at the present time in which librarians who are engaged in work in the field of Black Studies can meet and discuss the problems which are common to them in this area. My associate, Wendell Wray, and I propose to implement such a group within ALA in the ACRL division. Professor Wray and I have worked out the preliminary paper work and will be submitting the final draft of the petition with its signatures to the executive board of ACRL for its approval... Some of the topics which we have listed for possible discussion for this group are:*



APAS: African American Studies Librarians Section  
Association of College and Research Libraries - ACRL

*Status of Collections*  
*Resource Sharing*  
*Reference Services*  
*Bibliographic control*  
*Mechanized Information*  
*Retrieval*  
*Integrated vs. Separate Collections*  
*Interdisciplinary Nature*  
*Archival Materials*  
*Retrospective Collecting/Purchasing*  
*Selection Policies & Procedures*  
*Oral History*

You will notice many of those topics are as relevant today as they were twenty years ago.

Jeff went on to describe a survey he had included with the letter to document the range of interests included among those interested in establishing the Discussion Group. The statement in the petition that was actually submitted to ACRL read:

*During the decade of the 70s many colleges and universities established Black Studies programs. In support of these programs, collections of various dimensions were created and librarians who had interest or subject knowledge in this area were hired to serve these collections. As a method of determining how this aspect of librarianship and collection development has progressed, a discussion group should be formed with the object of conducting an on-going evaluation, discussion and research in this area of librarianship.*

The Black Studies Librarianship Discussion Group of ACRL met formally for the first time on February 1, 1981 at 9:30 a.m. in the Nathan Hale Room of the Sheraton Hotel in Washington, DC. According to the report printed in the new Discussion Group's newsletter, "...the meeting was well attended, particularly for that time of the morning. There was a lively two hour discussion on many topics of interest in the area of Black Studies Librarianship, especially regarding the directions the group might wish to follow."

I also have a list of the twenty-nine people who attended that meeting but I'm not going to embarrass anyone here by reading who was, or was not in attendance. You can see me after the program if you are interested.

Since our topic here today is the natural relationship between African American Studies and Librarianship, I thought it might be interesting to recap some of the programs the Discussion Group, and later the Section, has sponsored over the years and to mention some of the people involved. With twenty years of programs to cover, I can't mention every one, nor can I give proper credit to each person involved.

Although our first official meeting was in February of 1981 in Washington, DC, our first official program was held, strangely enough, right here in San Francisco on Sunday, June 28, 1981. Our speaker was, again, strangely enough, the Chair of the Afro-American Studies Department at the University of California at Berkeley. Dr. Barbara Christian discussed the importance of Black Studies collections in her research and some of the problems she as a scholar saw in gaining access to both the information and the materials.

It is interesting to note that many of her concerns were the same as those listed in Jeff Jackson and Wendell Wray's letter calling for the establishment of a Black Studies Librarians Discussion Group; specifically, the need for more information about publications that are available in Black Studies, the inadequacy of many review sources, books going out of print too quickly, the availability of black journals in mainstream academic and public libraries, discussions of black issues from a black perspective (i.e. we need more



books by us not just about us), and the need for a greater partnership between Black scholars and Black Studies Librarians.

Our next program in Philadelphia in 1982 took a different format. The theme was "The Future of Black Studies Collections and Librarianship." By then Wendell Wray had been appointed Chief of Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture at the New York Public Library. He served as moderator for a panel that included the chair of an Afro-American Studies Department at a major public university, a library administrator from an Ivy League university, the head of Acquisitions at the Schomburg, and the head of a music collection in a major research library containing significant African American research materials.

In 1983 we came back to California with the theme "Primary Resources: Their Publication, Acquisition, and Use" our Discussion Group chair, William Welburn of Princeton University, moderated a panel consisting of Mamy Clayton, Director of the Western States Black Research Center; Robert A. Hill, of the African Studies Center at UCLA; and Nathaniel Davis, Librarian of the Center for Afro-American Studies also at UCLA.

In 1985 we shifted our focus to Black Publishers with the topic "Popular and Scholarly Trends in Black Publishing Since the 1960s". The speakers included Paul Coates from Black Classics Press, Haki Madhubuti from Third World Press, and Rosemary Stevenson, the Afro-American Bibliographer at the University of Illinois, Urbana.

We have not restricted our programs to ALA meetings. In April of 1989 we sponsored a program at the ACRL 5th National Conference in Cincinnati, OH, entitled "Black Collections: How and Why". Our primary speaker was Robert L. Harris, Director of the Africana Studies and Research Center at Cornell University.

I might point out here that it has been my personal observation that our programs have been the only significant black presence at ACRL national conferences. Had it not been for our programs, there would have been hardly any African American presence at many of those conferences.

In 1989, due to a large extent to the efforts of our Chair Clarence Chisholm, we were successful in having the status of the Discussion Group upgraded to that of a Section in ACRL. This move recognized our standing within ACRL and entitled us to funding and technical support for programming.

In 1989 we also held one of our most successful programs ever. The title was "Out of Sight, Out of Mind, Out of Print." It dealt with the problem of African American research materials going out of print too rapidly and with the companies that had become involved in reprinting them. Representatives of Howard University Press, Chadwyck-Healey, Inc., Greenwood Press, Ayer Publisher, Finders Keepers, G.K. Hall, Gale Publishers, Kraus International, and Harcourt Brace and Javonovich set up booths to display the ranges of out of print and reprint products they had to offer.

Our attention has not been limited to the African American experience as represented in the printed word. In New Orleans in 1988 our topic was "Black People with White Minds -- Ethnic Notions." Using Marlon Riggs film "Ethnic Notions" as a launching pad, we had scholars and librarians discuss perceptions of race as portrayed in history, literature, and art. Again in Chicago in 1990 our topic was "Black Heritage in Video and Audio". A panel consisting of librarians, scholars, publishers, and media vendors discussed media resources in Black Studies and the problems librarians face in identifying, locating, evaluating, and purchasing them.

In 1990 we hosted Dr. Henry Louis Gates in a presentation entitled "To Plead Our Own Cause: Black Publishing in American History and Library Programs." The presentation was accompanied with a demonstration of several new products based on his work with black authors and black publishers.

The next year, in Atlanta, our focus moved to literacy with "Strengthening Family Literacy in the Black Community". The speakers included Mrs. Andrew Young and Curtis G. Aikens, the Greengrocer. Curtis had become very active in the literacy movement and was very pleased to be able to address our group.



AFAS: African American Studies Librarians' Section  
Association of College and Research Libraries-ALA

Our contribution to the 6th ACRL National Conference in Salt Lake City, UT, in 1992 was a presentation authored by Howard Dodson, Chief of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture entitled "The African American Studies Collection: Its Development, Maintenance, and Future" with responses by a panel of African American Studies librarians.

Our 1992 annual conference program looked at bibliographic access to African American information resources with a panel consisting of a librarian, a student, a professor, and a CD-ROM product vendor. Topics addressed included cataloging and classification, subject headings, indexing and abstracting services, currency of terminology, and cultural sensitivity. The panel also addressed the impact of computerized library catalogs, cooperative collection development arrangements, online databases, and CD-ROM sources on the availability and accessibility of information on the African American Experience.

In 1993, under the inspired leadership of Dr. Doris Clack, we became very ambitious and attempted an assessment of three decades of working with Afro-American Information Resources from the 1960s to the 1990s. Our panel consisted of an historian and college president an archivist, a publisher, and a public library administrator. We closed that meeting with a memorial tribute to Clarence Chisholm, one of our most innovative and energetic section chairs. For several years Clarence had been the backbone of this organization.

Electronics are represented in our programs with Gladys Smiley Bell's 1994 presentation "Using Internet Resource Location Tools to Find African American Studies Resources on the Net" at the 2nd National Conference of African American Libraries in Milwaukee. In 1995 we discussed "Digitizing African American Resources for Electronic Access" at the 7th ACRL National Conference in Pittsburgh, and in 1997 Floyd Ingram held a workshop on "Creating a Web Page," at the BCALA 3rd National Conference.

On a more philosophical level at that same conference, Gladys Smiley Bell, Itibari Zulu, Andrew Jackson, and Deidre Badejo held an open mike discussion on the existence of a distinct concept of Black Librarianship. This was an extension of a discussion that had begun on AFAS-L, the section's listserv. It was also a think piece for a proposed electronic journal of black librarianship.

#### Conclusions:

Over the past twenty years the Black Studies Librarians' Discussion Group and the African American Studies Librarians' Section of the Association of College and Research Libraries has been successful in meeting the objectives outlined in the founding petition. It has stimulated dialogue among librarians, scholars, students, authors, publishers, and commercial producers of African American information resource products. Through its programs at ALA meetings such as the one we are having here today, at ACRL national conferences, and BCALA national conferences, it has provided a forum for the discussion of issues of importance to librarians responsible for documenting the African American experience. We have dealt with collection development, preservation, bibliographic access, resource sharing, publishing, reprints, literacy, film, video, and the internet, exhibitions, and the future of ethnic and cultural special collections.

Through our web page, and AFAS-L our listserv, we have provided important vehicles for continuous conversation about our issues. This discussion on AFAS-L is now in entering its tenth year and over that decade has involved hundreds of people.

We have successfully applied our skills as information specialists to the field of African American studies. The interaction has been a natural partnership and has been beneficial to both librarianship and to African American studies. I am very pleased to be able to say that I have played some small role in fostering that relationship and would like to thank each of you for your participation as well.

Thank you.