

Objects Over People Critiquing Notions of Institutional Inclusion Within Library Heritage Collections

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Article abstract

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Objects Over People: Critiquing Notions of Institutional Inclusion Within Library Heritage Collections

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ABSTRACT

There is a tradition and practice in Western libraries and other information institutions of collecting, stewarding, and taking “cultural heritage” materials from non-Western communities or about non-Western subjects. Attention to the practice of collecting cultural heritage is heightened during times of perceived threat, vulnerability, or destruction of these materials, and the ways in which libraries and memory workers can intervene in their protection. Framed as removal and rescue, the practice and narrative around absorbing “at risk” heritage materials reveals a set of assumptions about how libraries and information institutions attempt to decontextualize themselves from the world; this essay will unpack this framing, its outcomes, whose interests it serves, and the kinds of politics it extends and legitimizes. Utilizing textual analysis of mainstream library guidelines and communications, and drawing on principles of critical librarianship, art criticism, and anti-colonial writing, which point to the embeddedness of library and information work within regimes of power, this chapter will problematize the tendency of our fields to deploy rhetorics of inclusion—and the politics that underpin that rhetoric—in its justification of heritage absorption and representation, namely, that it inherently contributes to a social justice project, is universally desired, and serves an imagined “public good.”

Keywords: *critical librarianship · institutional theory · library collections · racial capitalism*

RÉSUMÉ

Il existe une tradition et une pratique dans les bibliothèques occidentales et autres institutions d'information consistant à collecter, gérer et prendre des documents du « patrimoine culturel » provenant de communautés non occidentales ou sur des sujets non occidentaux. L'attention portée à la pratique de la collecte du patrimoine culturel est accrue pendant les périodes de menace perçue, de vulnérabilité ou de destruction de ces objets, et sur la manière dont les bibliothèques et les travailleuses.eurs de la mémoire peuvent intervenir dans leur protection. Présentée comme étant de la récupération et sauvetage, la pratique et le récit autour de l'absorption de matériel patrimonial « à risque » révèlent un ensemble d'hypothèses sur la façon dont les bibliothèques et les institutions d'information tentent de se décontextualiser du monde ; cet essai décortiquera ce cadrage, ses

résultats, les intérêts qu'il sert et les types de politiques qu'il promeut et rend légitime. En utilisant l'analyse textuelle des directives et des communications des bibliothèques traditionnelles, et en s'appuyant sur les principes de la bibliothéconomie critique, de la critique d'art, des études ethniques et de l'écriture anticoloniale, qui soulignent la colonialité inhérente au travail de mémoire occidental, cet article problématisera la tendance de nos disciplines à déployer des rhétoriques d'inclusion — et la politique qui sous-tend cette rhétorique — dans sa justification de l'absorption et de la représentation du patrimoine, à savoir qu'elle contribue intrinsèquement à un projet de justice sociale, est universellement souhaitée et sert un « bien public » imaginé.

Mots-clés : *bibliothéconomie critique · capitalisme racial · pcollections de bibliothèques · théorie institutionnelle*

I WORK in a library building that features prominently on many of UCLA's promotional materials. I understand why. The Powell Library was one of the first two buildings erected during campus construction in the 1920s and was architecturally inspired by Italian Romanesque basilicas. The building is towering and ornate and intimidating, and is prominently adorned with mythical and religious iconography. There is an alcove on the second landing of the entryway staircase that I often look at when I head up to the main rotunda and reading room. The alcove is modeled after an Islamic *mihrab*, which traditionally faces Mecca and contains a Quran, denoting the direction one performs *salah*, or prayer. "In this building," I read in a writeup of the history of the library, the *mihrab* instead "indicates the direction of the book stacks" (Dudley 1996).



This is not an essay about the architectural history of the Powell Library, nor is it about a particular library system, institution, or library worker(s). However, it

feels appropriate to begin a critical discussion of how libraries-as-such¹ conceive of themselves—and their property—with a design decision that seems predicated on the belief that books are sacred objects. The use of Islamic architecture and imagery to impose a sense of sacredness in the library is also pertinent to the discussion, given the tendency for Western libraries to decontextualize themselves and their objects from the material conditions within which these objects were produced.

Removed from cultural and religious contexts within which *mihhrabs* have existed and from the intended uses of their creators, primacy is given to the *mihhrab* as a disconnected entity, implanting it in a space (the library) that similarly decontextualizes itself from its own contexts of production. What function did (and does) Powell's *mihhrab* serve and to whom when, at the time of its construction, the newly-formed University of California campus—a land-grant institution—continued to expand and encroach upon the historic homeland and unceded territory of the Tongva peoples, adjacent to the then up-and-coming Westwood Village neighborhood, notorious for its redlining and racial segregation (Mehta 2021)? How, more generally, can objects be sacred (and again, to whom) when they are displaced and given primacy over the very people who create and give them meaning? How can an institution, a library system, or a professional field see itself as well-positioned to “include,” steward, and represent these purportedly sacred objects when it is unable and unwilling to locate itself within history and politics?

There is a tradition and practice in Western libraries and information institutions of collecting, stewarding, and taking “cultural heritage” or “area” materials by and about non-Western communities. In academic libraries, these heritage or area materials can be found in book stacks, in exhibit cases, and in storage units. While these materials are not confined to a particular library division or department, they often fall under the purview of special collections, archives, and so-called “international” collections. Attention to the practice of collecting and protecting heritage materials is heightened during times of perceived threat, vulnerability, or destruction of these objects, and the ways in which libraries and memory workers can intervene in their protection. Framed as removal and rescue, the practice and narrative around absorbing and including “at risk” heritage materials reveal a set of assumptions around how libraries and information institutions situate themselves within the world. In the following pages, I will unpack this framing, its outcomes, the interests it serves, and the kinds of politics it extends and legitimizes. In particular, I grapple with the following questions by way of exploring the treatment of heritage collections in libraries and information fields: what does it mean for an object

1. Localized application of Grande's (2018) term “university-as-such” as used and explicated in Hudson (2023).

to be included in a space, in a collection, in a library system, when libraries and information fields functionally decontextualize the violent circumstances through which heritage materials were (and are) acquired, stewarded, and funded, including the library's role within structures of extraction, as well as, crucially, the people who create and steward them? In what ways do the liberal logics of inclusion inadvertently prioritize object immortality over human life, as well as over creator and community agency, thereby normalizing the structures of power and domination which lead to libraries acquiring these materials in the first place?

The purpose of this discussion, then, is not to downplay the importance or value of heritage materials, particularly as they relate to the individuals and communities who create them or are represented therein. Under question, rather, are the claims and criteria through which we assign cultural or research value to objects, as well as the audiences we envision and interests we serve when we assert something must be preserved for that fact. My focus is thus not the objects themselves per se, but the outcomes and political projects associated with their treatment, and what that treatment signals about libraries and information work. Further, the present discussion is not necessarily one about cultural appropriation—though such discussions are important and necessary in the context of library work, my focus is less on abiding or transgressing appropriate boundaries around who should use what, or the right and respectful way to use objects, and more about the material conditions these library objects represent. While approaches to heritage and area materials undoubtedly differ from institution to institution, the narratives through which institutions establish legitimacy as owners (and stewards) of these objects are nonetheless marked by two commonalities: 1) that the act of absorbing heritage objects removes them from space and time, preserving them in “safe” (i.e., apolitical/ahistorical) spaces and 2) simultaneously, the work of absorption inherently serves as an act of cultural inclusion—that is, an act of diversity-building, or contributing to broader anti-racist projects. The proceeding sections will explore the (often unintended) consequences of these common narratives.

Extending the Myth of the Apolitical and Ahistorical Library

It is not difficult to locate narratives that assert that libraries—and memory institutions broadly—are both obligated and well-positioned to absorb and represent heritage materials; these narratives tend to be communicated by professional organizations, individual institutions, and library and information workers alike (henceforth referred to as “the library world”).² Such narratives tend to explicitly or

2. See RBMS (2020), ACRL (2023), and IFLA (2017), the last of which position libraries as “crucial actors in the safeguarding of cultural heritage.”

implicitly suggest that the presence of these materials within libraries, as “crucial actors in the safeguarding of cultural heritage,” ensures their long-term protection, preservation, and access (IFLA 2017). These narratives reveal a set of assumptions about how the library world situates itself within the world—namely, that it exists outside of it.

The production of libraries and library work within the political, social, and economic conditions of our world continues to develop in the growing body of structural critique in library discourse and literature. This emerging critique rightfully elucidates the ways in which regimes of power and domination shape the Western library world at its bedrock, including (but not limited to) its production of knowledge hierarchies (Leung and López-McKnight 2021) and delegitimization of knowledge produced outside of it, its carceral geographies (maminta and Abbott 2023), and its widespread labour issues (Drabinski et al. 2019). This emergent discourse reminds us that libraries, as mainstream collecting institutions, cannot be understood as decoupled or outside of normative power relations, but as constitutive of them. The current discussion examines the relationship between such power relations and institutional cultural heritage; specifically, it considers the ways in which structures of domination, namely, colonialism and capitalism, and their—as articulated by Ruth Wilson Gilmore—functional dependence on racial practice and hierarchy (Card 2020), can be traced through Western institutional absorption, ownership, and stewardship of heritage, thereby elucidating the library world’s embeddedness within such relations.³ This recognition is urgent in the context of academic libraries in particular, which provide ample terrain for examining libraries’ relationship to the social, political, and historical. As Robin D. G. Kelley (2016) reminds, the Western academy—and by extension academic libraries—must be understood as “corporate entities in their own right,” their architecture predicated on, as noted by Sandy Grande (2018), settler colonial logics of “elimination, capital accumulation, and dispossession” (47).

Despite the production and reconstitution of libraries within structures of power, and the aforementioned body of LIS literature which cautions against framing violences born of these structures, on an individual, apolitical basis, dominant library discourse tends to present, as Seale (2016) notes, “a vision of librarianship ... completely decoupled from political, economic, social, and historical contexts” (588). This incongruity is detectable in various pockets of dominant library discourse, from those that hold onto the false myth and aspiration of library neutrality, to those that

3. The Iraqi Ba’ath party records—seized during the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq—which remain in the ownership of the Hoover Institution Library & Archives, despite calls for their return on the part of the Iraqi people (Caswell et al. 2021), come to mind as a direct example (there are many) that illustrates libraries as both legitimizers and benefactors of power relations.

employ(E)quity, (D)iversity, and (I)nclusion, which situates oppression as caused by individual failure and competence rather than regimes of power. These dominant interpretations share an inability to locate the production of the library and library work within the fabrics of the societies that produce them by treating relations of power as *external* to libraries and library work. This tendency is similarly detectable in rescue narratives in and around non-Western cultural heritage, which extend the same set of logics that suppose that libraries are somehow decontextualized from the societies that produce them.

Framed as removal and rescue, the absorption and “safeguarding” of cultural heritage in libraries is framed as both dutiful and prudent. In this rendering, libraries are positioned as natural landing places to house and steward materials due to their supposed ability to keep them safe and removed.⁴ It is in this assertion of libraries as safe spaces, defined by a temporal, social, and political distance, where we can locate (again) the tendency for libraries to be unable and unwilling to engage with the structural. Heritage is *vulnerable* elsewhere, but not *here*, and thus libraries—self-proclaimed as secure, resourced, and otherwise removed from the conditions that compromise the immortality of objects—are seen as well-suited (if not obligated) to absorb them. Consistent with Fobazi Ettarh’s (2018) concept of “vocational awe” (which draws attention to the apolitical mythologizing of libraries as inherently sacred and removed from the fabric of the societies that produce them), heritage narratives render libraries’ embeddedness within structures of power unquestioned. When understood as both a product of and in service to power relations (namely racial capitalism), then, libraries’ self-ideation as distant and removed ring hollow. In short, rescue narratives tend to convey an apolitical vision of the library world that belies reality.

The post-political disposition that underlies the library world’s framing of heritage is also observable in its attempts to locate and name the conditions that compromise the so-called safety of these objects. Consider, for instance, section B.2.8 of the American Library Association’s “Policy Manual Section B: Positions and Public Policy Statements” (ALA 2013), which states the following on the destruction of libraries and their objects:

The American Library Association deplores the destruction of libraries, library collections and property, and the disruption of the educational process by that act, whether it be done by individuals or groups of individuals and whether it be in the name of honest dissent, the desire to control or limit thought or ideas, or for any other purpose. (19)

4. See, for instance, the ACRL Code of Ethics for Special Collections Librarians (RBMS 2020), which states that library special collections workers “have an ethical obligation to take proactive steps in keeping collections intact and secure from theft, loss, and damage” (ACRL 2023).

This statement exemplifies an unwillingness to engage context. Destruction is just that, *destruction*, as if it exists in a vacuum; it conflates “honest dissent”—and the conditions that might lead to that dissent—with malicious attempts to suppress libraries. Whether destruction of libraries happens in the context of state-sanctioned death and violence, or as an act of right-wing mobilization and outrage, is not legible within this apolitical framing.⁵ Thus, primacy is given to objects as disconnected entities, functionally providing an alibi for not engaging with the historical, social, and political. This refusal gives libraries permission to merely focus on *things*, objects, property, and their physical maintenance.

This section has laid out how the library world decontextualizes itself from its material contexts of origin and reconstitution, and the ways in which rescue narratives in and around cultural heritage are congruent with this rendering. In the proceeding pages, I will continue to speculate on how this unwillingness to engage in the structural also presents in the ways in which heritage is treated once they are within the institution. Further, I will speculate on how apolitical inclusion of heritage *within* the institution decenters human life, and functions to normalize the structures of power and domination that lead to libraries acquiring heritage materials in the first place.

The *Process* of Removal, Storage, and Representation of Heritage as Outside of History and Politics

Object immortalization—or, at least, long-term survival—is nothing new when it comes to libraries and how they operate, from print collections, to shared spaces, to technology, and so on. Procedures for overseeing shared use of *things* are seemingly prudent, even necessary, particularly for those libraries (most) that experience resource scarcity. And yet, the treatment of property in libraries—concerned primarily around elongating and optimizing its existence—provides further evidence of the library world’s tendency to decontextualize both itself and the contexts through which objects come to be absorbed into institutions. Inordinate resources and library writing have endeavored to implement the best processes for acquiring heritage, of storing it, of prolonging and monitoring its existence, of “activating” it among library users, but not *too* much, not enough to compromise its integrity. When understood as property, as *value* to the institution (whether in the form of monetary donations incurred due to institutional ownership, or a supposed “scholarly” or “research” value), then procedures *around* heritage function to remove it from space and time, from context and history (Kim 2020). If the destination institution is understood as embedded within the structural, then its attending bureaucratic and procedural

5. Section B.2.8 has been cited by ALA in the destruction of libraries in Iraq and Gaza (see <https://www.ala.org/aboutala/offices/iro/awardsactivities/international>).

mechanisms for absorbing heritage should, similarly, be understood in terms of the structural. The forthcoming paragraphs will attempt to lay out how libraries do not (and cannot) simply collect things in apolitical terms, particularly in the context of heritage from non-Western communities.

The emphasis on heritage longevity and value retention is congruent with the inherent coloniality of Western library and information work. Whether from nineteenth century robber barons, whose personal and private collections formed the foundation of US libraries and museums (Kim 2020), to objects accumulated through plunder and conquest (Caswell 2011), to libraries acquiring heritage because individuals and communities lack the financial resources to steward them (SAADA 2018), heritage absorption, stewardship, and display is modeled upon regimes of expropriation (Kim 2024). Times of perceived threat or vulnerability of heritage sharpen into view the library world's inability to reckon with its own complicity and emergence within its political and historical context, and further, its treatment of heritage as inherently shaped by its emergence within regimes of power.

Underpinning calls to immortalize heritage objects are notions that doing so is a righteous act—to preserve and keep safe objects is for an imagined “public benefit” and to guarantee their accessibility and use to future generations. The air of virtuousness that packages these calls is consistent with liberal universalizing political rhetoric, which asserts that *anyone* should have access to *anything* if an institution deems that thing to possess research or scholarly “value.” Preservation is treated as an act of care—to care for objects, in this rendering, is somehow tantamount to caring for people, in this case current and “future users.” Legitimized by international law (UNESCO 1954) that universalizes access to heritage under a banner of humanitarianism, institutions are further tempted to apoliticize themselves and the means through which they come to acquire and preserve heritage. The international community's fear of losing this heritage ultimately reveals a set of anxieties about losing access to heritage, to which Western memory fields regard “the public” as being entitled (Samudzi 2021b). In this rendering, to preserve objects is seen as an act of care.

In Eunsung Kim's (2020) trenchant essay “remain |un| conquered,” Kim outlines and admonishes the conflation of conservation and care, and the excessive amounts of time and resources dedicated to this endeavor. Kim writes: “To remain intact, to remain undamaged and removed, from not just touch and harm, but from the possibility of context and history.” This is to say, when heritage objects are absorbed into the institution, when they are proceduralized under the banner of sacred or virtuous property, their connection to the world is severed: they are treated as

disconnected entities that become a form of capital that generates more capital, whether intangible “prestige,” research value, or actual money. In this context, the process of removal, storage, and representation of heritage can be understood as consistent racial capitalist and colonial logic of accumulation and extraction, upon which these institutions emerged and are sustained. To protect an object, to keep it safe from physical degradation, is to enforce and surveil its boundaries. Though approaches to enacting these boundaries, and the technologies and interventions implemented for that purpose, differ from institution to institution, their enforcement nonetheless functions to deepen the fissure between objects and world, from their contexts of production, from people who use them in deeply securitized spaces.

Despite claims to the contrary, the preoccupation with property and object survival also alienates us—as library and information workers—from each other and from the library users we wish to support and collaborate with. It is not difficult to locate these fissures in the library world, particularly through guidelines and best practices language that emphasize the necessity of surveillance, and often punishment.⁶ Herein lies further evidence of the library world’s production within structural entanglements, in this case carcerality and its attending mechanisms (both social and technological). As a localized application of Jarred M. Drake’s (2016) observations on the surveillance apparatus of archives, (identification requirements, bag inspections, and closed-circuit cameras are examples of commonplace measures—ones that can be found in many library special collections reading rooms) that should be contextualized within the broader terrain of the surveillance state.

The present argument has laid out that supposed “rescue” of heritage should be understood, instead, as *containment* and *confinement*, not into “neutral” or “safe” spaces, but into ones that have always been, and will continue to be reconstituted, by relations of power. And yet narratives rooted upon a virtuous obligation to heritage, which stress imperatives to keep it safe for an imagined public, serve as an alibi for libraries to not engage with the economic, political, and social (Seale 2016, 592). This raises a concern and question in regards to library ownership of heritage: how does refusing to engage in critiques of the structural, and the ways it presents in and around our work, function to normalize processes of power and domination, and

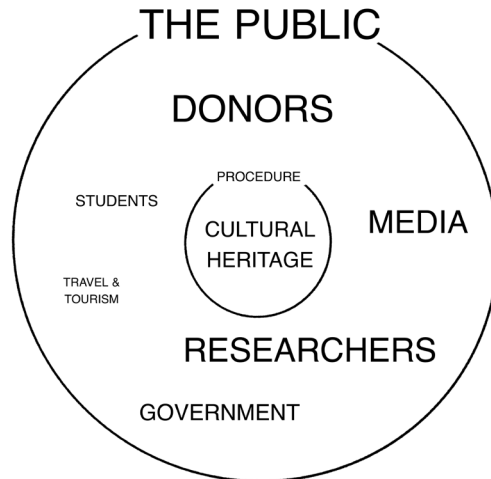
6. Some relevant examples include: a 2012 article in *College & Research Libraries*, titled “Unusual Suspects: The Case of Insider Theft in Research Libraries and Special Collections,” which weaponizes the potential loss of “global cultural heritage” as justification for heightened surveillance and prosecution of library thefts against “perpetrators,” including students, community users, and fellow library workers (Samuelson et al. 2012, 556); the 2023 ACRL/RBMS Guidelines Regarding the Security of Special Collections Materials, which stresses an obligation “to take proactive steps in keeping collections intact and secure from theft, loss, and damage” by using security measures transparently and discerningly (ACRL 2023); and the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute, in cooperation with the American University of Rome, which offered a 2024 course on “Cultural Heritage, Crime, and Security” focused on “the role of the military in protecting cultural heritage” (it notes this in the same topic list that features “conflict and decolonization—the legacy of empire”) (UNICRI, n.d.).

their functional dependence on racialized violence globally, that lead to libraries absorbing heritage in the first place?

Problematizing the Narrative of Inclusion

Rescue narratives that frame the absorption of heritage as righteous, even liberatory, extend a set of logics that substitute—and even conflate—objects with people. In other words, the actual people and communities who create or are represented within heritage are treated as secondary, while their objects are seen as their proxies. This conflation is often unintended, latent to our field's hegemonic narratives surrounding the “diversification” of library collections as contributing to a substantive anti-racist project (more on this later). In this rendering, inclusion of marginalized library materials into institutions is viewed as universally desired and inherently virtuous, working in the best interests of communities represented by and within collections, and those whose libraries purport to use them.

Central to institutional insistence on preservation and inclusion of heritage are implications that doing so is an act of collectivism. To diversify the catalog, in these renderings, is not only an act of justice for marginalized people, but framed as an act of consideration for all, who, in the case of libraries, are referred to as library users. Yet it is in the “citation of the “great public benefit,” as noted by Samudzi (2021b), wherein we can identify the GLAM sector's (galleries, libraries, archives, and museums) inability to reckon with its limited view of who constitutes “the public” that benefits from inclusion of heritage. Certainly, those whose lives are destroyed due to racial violence, brought on by the structural conditions that compromise the so-called safety of objects, cannot be part of the so-called public who reap the benefits of rescued heritage. Whether positioned as being for future researchers or the general public, the imagined group of users of heritage is not purported as exclusive, despite the abundance of LIS scholarship that rightfully points to the opposite (Leung and López-McKnight 2021). To be clear, the focus here is not to call on our imagined public to be more inclusive, but rather, to draw attention to the boundaries inherent to Western memory and information work that reproduce hierarchy and decontextualize heritage from the world. I attempt to visualize this process below:



Library rescue narratives regarding non-Western heritage increasingly contain suggestions that inclusion in the institution is a liberatory act. The stakes and treatment of cultural heritage in this context extends a set of logics that substitute—and even conflate—people (including their demands, knowledge systems, and epistemes) with their objects. In other words, however well-intended, the actual people and communities who create or are represented within heritage are treated as secondary, or displaceable, while their objects are treated as proxies for them. Such narratives can be found in genuine attempts to contribute to a supposed anti-racist project through institutional Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) and its calls to diversify library collections.⁷ EDI, which is presently “the dominant conceptual framework through which Library and Information Studies (LIS) addresses questions of racialized power and difference” (Hudson 2017, 3), is compatible with the oft-cited call to “diversify our collections,” to include marginalized voices, which the absorption of non-Western heritage seemingly contributes to.

The purported mission of inclusion of cultural heritage, as contributing broader anti-racist projects, may initially appear out of step with the previously discussed claim that the library world apoliticizes itself. Yet this tendency, for libraries to position themselves as existing outside of history and politics, is wholly consistent

7. There are also unconscionable examples from related information and memory fields, which blatantly substitute objects of “cultural value” with human life. For instance, the fourth of the J. Paul Getty Trust Occasional Papers in Cultural Heritage, *Cultural Heritage Under Siege* (Cuno and Weiss 2020), created in conversation with the British Academy, discusses the need for “an international framework” (38) to protect cultural heritage in zones of armed conflict in response to “violence perpetrated against objects” in Iraq, Syria, Mali, and Sri Lanka (6). Encouraging foreign “political, military, and normative entrepreneurs [to] take advantage of this moment” (9) by seizing objects. Appropriating the very real and interlocking process of cultural erasure in the context of mass murder and genocide, the paper suggests that defense and seizure of vulnerable material culture by the international community (never mind that community’s culpability in the conditions of these regions) is tantamount to saving humanity and fighting genocide (11).

within the logics of institutional EDI, which is apolitical in nature and chiefly concerned with making current institutions and structures of power more diverse and hospitable as an end goal in achieving racial justice. Rather than evaluating “the structural character of racism,” the EDI paradigm’s inability to interrogate the relationship between race and power renders our field’s embeddedness within the structural unquestioned. Commenting on necessity of addressing the Euro- and Anglo-centrism of library collections, but reflecting on its limitations as an act of social justice, David James Hudson (2017) notes:

It is unclear how the purposeful inclusion of underrepresented works and the ways of knowing they represent is a more substantive “social justice” approach.... The presence of such works in a library does not ensure their agency, epistemologically speaking, in “the scholarly and cultural record” per se, as presence alone poses no structural challenge to the research and curricular knowledge frameworks within which the works are used (or altogether ignored). (12)

To emphasize, the point here is not to admonish the positive and often necessary inclusion of underrepresented works into library collections. Rather, the focus here is to problematize and question the framing of inclusion within library collections as a form of material liberation.⁸

It is also worth questioning the tendency for the narrative of inclusion to assert that inclusion and recognition are universally desired. This questioning is particularly urgent if we consider what it means for non-Western heritage to be included in mainstream collecting institutions given the inherent coloniality of Western memory work (Samudzi 2021b), which augments the library world’s treatment of collections, knowledge systems, and information that requires contortion into hegemonic and normative designations. For instance, Keguro Macharia (2016) interrogates the ways in which coloniality shapes so-called “area” and “international” studies as fields of study which centre the United States as the place to which information flows. As an Africa-based queer scholar, Macharia notes how geo-disciplinary designations do not travel well, particularly for those who do not conceive of their work vis-à-vis the United States (183). Others, like Michelle Caswell (2021), remind that the dominant Western archival theory—not dissimilar dominant library paradigms—is rooted in a white temporal imaginary which asserts linear progress narratives, defined by “white supremacist, patriarchal, and

8. Consider the many library publications, conferences, and communications that use the verbiage of “decolonizing the collection/catalogue” to describe the process of diversifying library holdings, for example: “Decolonizing the Catalogue” (*American Libraries* 2021), the Library Marketplace’s “Decolonizing Library Resources Collection” (<https://www.thelibrarymarketplace.com/collections/ocula-conference-2023-decentering-whiteness>), or the American Library Association’s announcement of the book *Narrative Expansions: Interpreting Decolonization in Academic Libraries* (<https://www.ala.org/news/2021/12/interpreting-decolonization-academic-libraries>).

heteronormative temporalities” that treat the past as isolated and finite (35). This tendency is ill-equipped (even harmful) in representing lifeworlds, knowledge systems, and epistemes that exist outside of the Western tradition. What does it mean, then, for non-Western cultural heritage to be contorted to fit within such designations, which structure not only their fields of study, but our accompanying collections practices (Browndorf et al. 2022)? Or perhaps the question is, to whom is it actually meaningful?

Remarking on the practice of refusal in the context of indigenous peoples electing to have their records excluded from the National Archives of Canada, J. J. Ghaddar (2016) notes that “distrust, conflict, obscurity, and silence are not easily accommodated within a framework of inclusion or recognition” (22). With this acceptance, then, we may begin to “trouble the tendency to centre a politics of recognition” and accept that there is agency in oblivion (21). When framed, in this case, as anti-colonial resistance, then refusal of institutional recognition can be understood an act of agency and reclamation. We can observe this in the case of Columbia University Archives taking into custody Columbia and Barnard student encampment artworks without the consent of student organizers and artists, under the guise of maintaining “a historical record” that the institution claimed would otherwise be lost (Farfan 2024). Columbia and Barnard encampment organizers and artists rejected this line of thinking, pointing out that the work of documenting the movement was already being undertaken at the grassroots level (intentionally so, as one student noted, since they were not interested in collaborating with “the institutions [they were] trying to fight against”), and that historicising the materials severed their connection with the living, material world of protest they were produced within (Farfan 2024). Might acts of refusal of recognition by institutions (given their political relations), and the understanding of the limitations of the framework of recognition as a modality for interrogating race and power, provide us with an opportunity to reject—or at least question—the impulse to absorb and represent everything under the banner of “maintaining the historical record,” “diverse collecting,” or “public benefit”? If we wish to honor the people and communities we wish to represent, are we willing to accept that that might mean not representing them at all?

Final Reflections

I have attempted to lay bare some of the limitations and violences of the story that Western libraries and information fields tell about non-Western cultural heritage, namely, that we are keeping these objects “safe” by decontextualizing, immortalizing, and removing them from the world because we ourselves are not part

of it. This tendency, in turn, gives primacy to objects, while refusing to interrogate the structures that destroy human life while objects of institutional interest are destroyed. With this in mind, the purpose of this discussion is not to trivialize or mitigate the work of those who attempt to implement alternatives to parasitic approaches to institutional heritage absorption. There are, indeed, a growing number of community-engaged heritage and memory projects being undertaken by institutions, in dialogue with creator communities represented by and within collections, that attempt to implement a co/reverse curatorial model as opposed to a parasitic approach; I have participated in such projects and am heartened by them.⁹ And yet, as we deepen our engagement with structural critiques of information fields and their accompanying institutions, my hope is that we are able to reckon with the limitations of reform strategies, including co-curation, which may still reproduce the tendency to normalize the conditions that lead to our (co)ownership of heritage materials in the first place.

In recognizing the harms associated with our field's present hegemonic treatment of heritage, we can begin to explore alternatives that enable us to offer our collective expertise as information workers in support of preservation efforts, but that do not reproduce the tendency to give primacy to objects and are aligned with broader critiques of power and its impacts on human life. We may look to Librarians and Archivists with Palestine as one such example, and its recent report titled "Israeli Damage to Archives, Libraries, and Museums in Gaza, October 2023–January 2024," which centres the self-determination of Palestinian people, including murdered fellow library and information workers, and their lived experiences under occupation and bombardment, in its summary of destroyed heritage and its relationship to Palestinian collective identity and memory (LAP 2024). To refocus our attention towards structures of power in our treatment of heritage is to deprioritize the library world's interpretation of local needs, and to centre the demands of communities most connected to that heritage.

Questioning the political projects we associate with our work begets more questions: Who do we imagine as benefiting from our absorption of heritage and our accompanying statements, exhibits, collections? What logics (inclusion, recognition, removal) underpin their treatment, and how might this—even inadvertently—normalize relations of power and domination? Are we willing to acknowledge the limitations of liberatory work that is uncritical of our fields, related to heritage and otherwise, given our present embeddedness within the racial capitalist order? The

9. Despite the increase in collaborations between mainstream collecting institutions and grassroots community archives and self-documentation initiatives, these relationships remain inequitable. As noted by Caswell et al. (2021), "parachuting in, knowledge extraction, financial inequity, and transactional consent" on the part of institutions remains a prevailing tendency within these partnerships (2).

call here is not for more militant inclusion and recognition, but rather, to actively question the urge to collect, immortalize, and represent *everything* we deem of value, and to avoid insisting that doing so is inherently moral, necessarily contributes to a so-called public benefit, is universally desired, or can even be done equitably within our current entanglements.

Resisting the urge to rescue and represent “vulnerable,” “lost,” and “understudied” cultural heritage provides information and memory fields with an opportunity to decentre themselves within knowledge landscapes. The tendency for our institutions—including, and often especially, libraries—to treat knowledge and information produced outside of them as fixed, illegible, illegitimate, until they are absorbed and recognized by said institutions, reproduces a set of colonial logics that dictate which epistemes and ways of knowing the world are displaceable (Samudzi 2021a; Hudson 2016). To, as observed by Yusef Omowale (2018), “begin with the understanding that we have always been here—becoming” is to reckon with the structural characteristic of oppression and its attendant knowledge hierarchies, within which our fields exist and reconstitute. I believe starting with this understanding is to both reject the apolitical mythologizing of libraries as inherently “good,” “safe,” and “well-positioned” to absorb heritage, and to accept that recognition and agency are not synonymous in the context of Western library work.

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Appendix

I submitted my revisions for this paper in July 2024, nearly three months after the Palestine solidarity encampment at the University of California, Los Angeles, which was located just outside of the Powell Library, was forcibly dispersed from campus. Still, I encounter narratives, inside the library world and out, that emphasize concern for damages the Powell Library building incurred during the encampment, almost as though the building itself were a living thing: CBS, for instance, described the library as having “suffered” graffiti damage (Maetzold 2024). I think about how the supposed sanctity of libraries is used to maintain the status quo. I wonder when we will care for marginalized people and their demands more than objects.