

Connecting a Community:

The Black Pacific Northwest Collection at Multnomah County's North Portland Neighborhood Library

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Lee Catalano is a Regional Librarian at Multnomah County Library. It is her seventh Librarian position at MCL but she doesn't get bored easily, really.



Israel Gabriel Fin is a recent member of the Multnomah County Library team serving the community as a Black Cultural Library Advocate and Library Assistant who is marrying their love for Black community organizing with Library services.



Kirby McCurtis is a Library Manager for Multnomah County Library and the current President for the Association for Library Services to Children (ALSC).



Juneteenth, 1865

June 19, 1865, referred to as “Juneteenth,” celebrates the date when the official word of President Lincoln’s 1863 Emancipation Proclamation reached Texas, the most remote state of the former Confederacy.

Juneteenth, 1987

On June 19, 1987, the North Portland Neighborhood Library was buzzing with excitement at the official opening of Multnomah County Library’s Black Resource Center. There were speeches, music, activities for kids and families. The culmination of a community-led process nearly 20 years in the making, the Black Resource Center was a dedicated space holding a collection of materials of interest to the County’s African American community.



A photograph from The Gallery at the opening of the Black Resource Center. *Photo credits:* Fred Caldwell. Digital Publisher: Multnomah County Library. In copyright. Copyright owner unlocatable or unidentifiable.

Juneteenth, 2018

On June 19, 2018, North Portland Administrator Kirby McCurtis and Regional Librarian Lee Catalano spent the morning unpacking the new and recently recataloged items that will initially comprise the Black Pacific Northwest Collection (BPNW Collection). A prominent display space is carved out and the Collection is unveiled as the Library’s regular patrons enter at opening time.

An official notice that the BPNW Collection was available to library patrons was shared on Multnomah County Library’s social media channels and in a press release. The creation and opening of the Collection was an important milestone in North Portland’s 30+ year history of thoughtful and intentional service to its African American patrons.



In recent years, Multnomah County Library (MCL) has acted on a commitment outlined in our 2019-2021 Priorities to help make connections for a stronger community (Multnomah County Library, 2018). We've done this in a variety of collection and programmatic efforts, including encouraging local authors and musicians to become a part of our digital collections through the Library Writers Project and the Library Music Project. We've focused on sharing local collections of photographs, documents, audio, and video that represent Multnomah County's rich cultural heritage. Digital exhibits like "Our Story," which celebrates Black life in Multnomah County, "Brew Stories," which recognizes Portland's history of craft beer, and "Mapping Change," which tracks the physical alterations of the County through historical maps, are all available to patrons through our online portal, The Gallery.

The creation of the BPNW Collection is another example of this work to strengthen our community. Unlike the efforts described above, the commitment to providing a special collection for our African American patrons has a long history.

A Collection for African American Patrons

1943. The Library Association of Portland (MCL's predecessor) opened a library in Vanport, the nation's largest wartime housing development whose first tenants arrived six months earlier. "Ordering a collection of reading material for a population as heterogeneous as we have at Vanport is a thrilling experience," Librarian Eleanor Touhey stated in her annual report, "and talking with countless people from all sections of the country, learning their special viewpoints and particular problems, has been highly educational" (Touhey, 1944).

1966. North Portland Librarian Mary Griffin created a special collection of materials for study and recreational reading on African and African American subjects.

1987. Shepherded by Dr. William A. Little, an Associate Professor of Black Studies at Portland State University, the North Portland Library opened the Black Resource Center with an initial collection of more than 3,000 items. This was an important gesture to Portland's African American community during a time when the City of Portland implemented a racist policy of urban renewal through gentrification. The Library remained a beacon during a long period of cultural and physical disintegration of the vibrant and cohesive Albina neighborhood. Housing a collection of interest to the African American community explicitly said "You are welcome here" at a time when much of Portland was delivering an opposite message.

1987–2017. During its 30 years, the Center's collection more than doubled in size. Adding to the collection became an informal process by North Portland staff, who examined items to see if they met a broad criterion of relating to the African American experience. Qualifying items were then assigned to the collection. Following a major building renovation in 2000, the Center was renamed the Black Resources Collection (BRC) as changing space needs meant that there was no longer a separate "Center" housing the collection. Patrons were able to browse North Portland's full collection for interfiled BRC items, which were designated by a blue sticky dot affixed to the call number label.

While the collection kept growing, the neighborhood was inexorably changing. Housing grew expensive and many of the African American residents and businesses who anchored the Albina neighborhood were compelled to move away. Even though they often lived far away (and may have found another MCL branch nearer to home), many African Americans continued to call the North Portland Library their home location. However, there was also a feeling that North Portland didn't always center the African American community, deferring to the ma-



majority of white individuals and families now dominating the neighborhood. Mindful curation and management of the BRC fell into disuse, from staff time constraints and lack of interest.

Creation of the Black Pacific Northwest Collection

As the BRC passed its 30th anniversary, the time was right to re-examine its purpose.

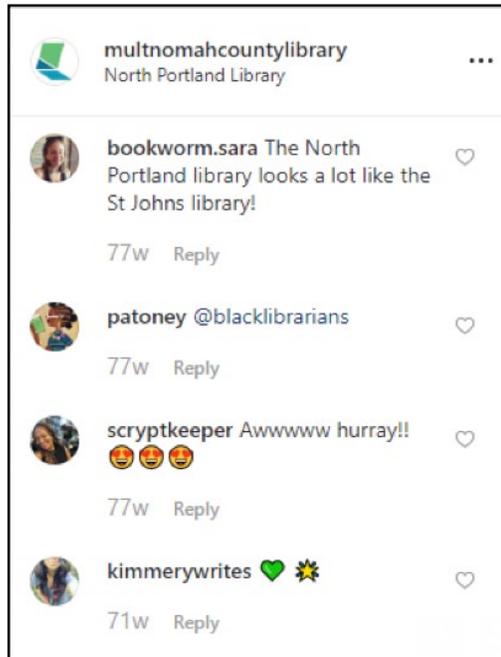
Early in 2018, MCL's Collection Services Manager convened a team to review the BRC's policies and propose a new direction for the collection. A review of documents pertaining to the 1987 creation of the Black Resource Center revealed how the collection could make long-lasting connections with Portland's 21st century African American community: "Special emphasis will be placed on materials from the Pacific Northwest" (Library's Black Resources Center, 1987).

From the project proposal:

Items from the current BRC that have a regional focus will be identified to create a new collection, the "Black Pacific Northwest Collection." The materials within this collection will focus on the Black experience in Oregon and the Pacific Northwest, and will include works by and/or about Black people in this geographic area. For purposes of this collection, Pacific Northwest is defined as Oregon, Washington, Idaho, and northern California. (Multnomah County Library, 2018, p. 1)

In addition, the team recommended a separate shelving location for the collection at North Portland Library and that, where possible, two copies of every item be purchased or relocated from MCL's larger collection. While items from the BPNW Collection are on the shelves at other MCL locations, only those located at North Portland have BPNW Collection noted on the call number. With just a few exceptions, all BPNW items circulate.





Regional Manager Kirby McCurtis shows off some of the BPNW on Instagram.

From the Multnomah County Library Instagram feed (<https://www.instagram.com/multnomahcountylibrary/>).

When we announced the availability of the collection, reaction from the community was encouraging, as demonstrated by our Instagram post.

Anecdotally, North Portland staff report satisfaction in being able to easily direct patrons who ask where the “black books” are (bearing in mind that “black books” are also shelved elsewhere in the library). Black Cultural Library Advocate Israel Fin has also found that sharing the availability of these local materials affords them the opportunity to introduce African American patrons to the broader offerings at the library and in turn to feel a shared sense of belonging in a community forced apart by decisions from the past.

Fin reports a singularly satisfying encounter with two African American teens in search of titles dealing with race and African Americans. When asked for resources on this topic, “it has become my habit,” Fin says, “to swing by the BPNW Collection to help our patrons discover this intentional collection that in scope, mirrors them.” This introduction to the collection inspired the teens, in turn, to begin telling Israel about their own history of Portland, three generations worth. “These young women,” Fin explains, “although no longer residents

The Black Pacific Northwest Collection Definition

The Black Pacific Northwest Collection comprises the literature, music, film and other creative expressions of the Black experience in the Pacific Northwest. Works by and about Black people residing in Oregon, Washington, Idaho and Northern California are eligible for inclusion. At this time, with the exception of items solicited through the Library Writers Project and the Library Music Project, all works must be physical, i.e., printed on paper, stored on discs.



of the neighborhood, were welcomed back with this special collection.” (I. Fin, personal communication, January 15, 2020)

We also find that patrons are finding and checking out items in the collection. In the 18 months since its creation, the items have circulated more than 1,200 times.

Future of the Black Pacific Northwest Collection

Like any new collection, the BPNW Collection requires some nurturing in order to flourish. New materials are added as MCL purchases them, and we continue to find eligible items in our existing collection. Our two initiatives soliciting literature and music created by our cardholders for our digital collections—the Library Writers Project and the Library Music Project—are a ready-made source of content for the BPNW. We plan on adding eligible works from these initiatives to the BPNW this spring.

We also issued our first call for submissions this September and we were kind of surprised and excited by the response (14!). We’re confident there must be more out there. 

Does your library own materials that might be eligible for inclusion in the BPNW Collection? These would not be works by established authors based in the region, but a patron who perhaps donated something they self-published or a resource about local history. It would be helpful if they were currently available for us to purchase, but this is not necessary. (Just to be clear: We do not wish to purchase items from your collections unless you are in the process of deaccessioning!)

Would you be willing to promote a call for submissions at your library?

If you wish to review a list of items currently in the BPNW Collection, visit the MCL catalog: <https://multcolib.bibliocommons.com/>. Change the search box to “Series” and type “Black Pacific Northwest Collection.”

We welcome your comments and suggestions via email:

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References

Library’s Black Resources Center dedication Friday. (1987, June 18). *The Oregonian*. Retrieved from NewsBank.

Multnomah County Library (2018, May). Project Proposal: Black Pacific Northwest Collection.

Multnomah County Library (2018, July 1). *Priorities 2019—2021*. Multnomah County Library. <https://multcolib.org/about/priorities> (NOTE: MCL’s Priorities have been revised in light of COVID-19. The superceded Priorities can be found here: <https://tinyurl.com/y6q6d7ac>)



Touhey, E. (1944). *Vanport Public Library Annual Report, August 1943 Through July 1944*. Vanport Public Library. <https://tinyurl.com/y3bsveaf>

Additional Resources

Black Pacific Northwest Collection at North Portland Library. (2019, September 4). The Skanner. Retrieved from www.theskanner.com.

Library to air Black Resources Center plan. (1986, November 19). *The Oregonian*. Retrieved from NewsBank.

Multnomah County Library. (1987). Multnomah County Library Black Resource Center Dedication. Portland, Or.

Richards, S. Early black literature to stock library shelves for opening of center. (1987, March 1). *The Oregonian*. Retrieved from NewsBank.

Links to Multnomah County Library's Local Collections

The Black Pacific Northwest Collection (<https://tinyurl.com/y3tbxxen>) or search the library catalog (<https://multcolib.bibliocommons.com/>) for Series: Black Pacific Northwest Collection

The Black Resources Collection (<https://tinyurl.com/y5egqamj>) or search the library catalog (<https://multcolib.bibliocommons.com/>) for Series: Black Resources Collection

The Gallery (<https://gallery.multcolib.org/>)

The Library Music Project (<https://librarymusicproject.com/>)

The Library Writers Project (<https://multcolib.org/library-writers-project>)

