

# An Interview with Dorothy J. Berry, Metadata Specialist and Project Manager for Umbra, an Initiative of the Givens Collection of African American Literature, University of Minnesota Libraries

by Jason Baird Jackson on July 18, 2016

*While a graduate student at Indiana University, Dorothy J. Berry concurrently earned an MA degree in [ethnomusicology](#) from the [Department of Folklore and Ethnomusicology](#) and a MLS degree from the [Department of Information and Library Science](#). She undertook several projects at the [Mathers Museum of World Cultures](#), including work co-curating the 2014 exhibition [Ojibwe Public Art, Ostrom Private Lives](#). Her masters research focused on African American musical theater in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era and she has broad interests in the curation and presentation of historical and cultural materials. She has just begun work as Metadata Specialist and Project Manager for [Umbra](#), “a free digital platform and widget that brings together content documenting African American history and culture.” The Umbra project is an initiative of the [University of Minnesota Libraries](#).*

**Jason Jackson (JJ):** Its great to catchup with you Dorothy! Congratulations on your new post at Minnesota. As you know, I am a huge fan of the work being done at the University of Minnesota Libraries, thus I am really eager to catchup with you and your efforts there. Umbra sounds very ambitious in terms of its technical work, its institutional partnerships, and its culture-changing goals. What is it all about and how are you beginning to contribute?

Dorothy Berry (DB): Umbra is ambitious in scope, indeed! In clear technical jargon, Umbra is an African American digital archives aggregate. It will provide an accessible interface for researchers at various experience levels to explore African American archival materials from across a wide variety of repositories, from huge institutions like the [Smithsonian](#) to smaller, but still vital cultural heritage sites like the [Jacob Fontaine Religious Museum](#). Umbra works as a gathering place for African American collections, placing far flung digitized holdings within the broader context of African American history.

Up until now, Umbra has primarily worked with its over 500 contributing institutions to get their already digitized holdings accessible through the site. My position as Metadata Specialist and Project Manager is part of a [Council on Library and Information Resources](#) funded grant to digitize over half a million holdings from over 70 collections across the University of Minnesota Libraries system. U of M library staff and faculty have already gone through their wealth of collections looking for hidden records related to African American history—collections which on their face may not be directly related to Black history but have turned out to have breadcrumb

trails leading to newly contextualized rich resources. At this point, we are in the digitization and metadata augmentation stage. There is a fantastic cadre of student workers doing large batch scanning and quality control. My position involves supervising their work, as well as using my research background in African American history to add to the metadata for these recontextualized items, making them more easily findable to future scholars studying Black history both in Umbra and in U of M's [Online Finding Aids](#) and [UMedia](#). Not to mention, of course, documenting the process along the way so that other major institutions can potentially implement a similar hidden holdings digitization plan for marginalized histories within their own collections.

In spite, or perhaps because, of the broad scope of the project Umbra has very clear pathways from both the front and back ends. My fellow Umbra team members with more forward facing positions are really masterful at organizing with stakeholders from all levels of participation and creating an aesthetically engaging and community engaged portal, and this massive addition from the University of Minnesota Libraries will go even further in making Umbra a research destination.



Dorothy J. Berry shares historic film photographs with [Danny Glover](#), star of stage and screen.

**JJ: That sounds awesome. I look forward to using it in my own work and teaching! In my experiences visiting there and talking with librarians and campus leaders, I came to see that Minnesota has long been a leader in special collections development and has advocated an approach to access that is mindful of broad and diverse community needs. It seems that your work there is a part and parcel to a wider embrace of open access values and practices. There is also the context of the [Big Ten Academic Alliance](#)—what we until recently called the Committee on Institutional Cooperation or CIC. Minnesota is part of a community of universities and libraries committed to working on such things in an innovative way. Indiana University is part of that environment too. How have your graduate studies and the hands-on work that you did at IU prepared you for the work that you are now doing?**

DB: I think the wealth of hands-on opportunities available at Indiana University are what have most prepared me for professional life. While a graduate student I had a two year assistantship at the [Archives of African American Music and Culture](#), one year at the [Black Film Center/Archive](#), a year's practicum at the [Mathers Museum of World Cultures](#), and a semester practicum in the [Film Archive](#). Librarianship in particular is a field that expects its emerging professionals to already have a wealth of experiences before getting that first full time job—I don't believe I've ever really seen a job listing that didn't ask for at least two years experience, unless it was a specific "recent graduates" oriented position (few and far between!). Having the opportunity to work at a variety of cultural heritage repositories in both front and back of house positions, exhibitions and cataloging, really set me up to have a set of skills and experiences that demonstrate competency, even from a very recent graduate.

On the academic side, I think the pursuit of a dual masters is really key for reaching new levels of accomplishment in archives and museums, especially when it comes to dealing with marginalized people's collections. My job involves adding value to pre-existing metadata—something that requires technical archival skills, but also a focused research background. Every archivist I've known has great research abilities and can quickly become an expert in the collection they're currently dealing with, but I think specific experience with rigorous research in a specific area leads to richer and more diverse finding aids and exhibits. Studying ethnomusicology was particularly of use as it established a research praxis that values discrete cultural intent, which is useful when working with marginalized people's collections, but also with historical collections as well. My focus has always been on historical ethnomusicology, and I'm a proponent of the idea of research-based historic ethnography. I believe that work in understanding historic lived experiences from the perspective of the day is integral in fairly representing archival collections, which is increasingly important in the more widely accessible world of digital archives.

**JJ: That is a great expression of the value of both hands-on work and interdisciplinary or multi-disciplinary academic training. You also stress something that I also care about, the continued importance of historical work in ethnographic fields that have often become very present-centered. In your concern for the historical experiences of marginalized groups, I hear you rightly stressing the need to understand and represent such peoples in their own historical contexts. This is part of the Umbra mission, as I read it. But this initiative clearly is also doing important social or political work in the present. Umbra's [name reminds](#) us,**

**for instance, of “a renegade group of Black writers and poets who helped create the [Black Arts Movement](#) in the 1960s.” I cannot stop thinking about all that is happening right now in our tragic, shared American present. What are some of the roles that you emphasize when you think about the work of the archivist and curator of African American cultural materials in the present?**

DB: What’s most important to me as an African American archivist/Archivist of African American materials is to use the past to inform the present that Black history has always been filled with a gradient of experiences, emotions, activism, and suffering. Because African American history is taught at a very surface level, usually beginning vaguely before the Civil War, people of all colors often come away with a historical timeline along the lines of “Antebellum slaves-Civil War-Maybe Harlem Renaissance-Civil Rights Movement-People had Afros-Hip Hop in the 90s.” Archivists have the ability to show materials from the hands of African Americans and people of African descent from the earliest periods of North American colonization, showing not only that Black people have always been here, but that those Black people were not tropes pushing forward a linear narrative of American history. Primary documents have the ability to humanize in a way that even the best written non-fiction book cannot, and Archivists are the gatekeepers for this information.

I think we are in a time of extreme hunger for this sort of history, in the face of racism that says Black life is one-note and useless. Letters, publications, notes, films, photos—they force people to see that Black life has always been an integral sinew in the American corpus, and that Black people are human. That phrase “that Black people are human,” should be trite but we live in a segmented society that has long seemed to view African Americans as symbols, as stand-ins for cultural and social issues. Fleshing out human experience is an incredibly important role for all cultural heritage workers, but I think archivists have a really unique ability to share things that can completely turn a worldview on it’s head.

I love African American musical theater of the turn of the 20th century, and people usually get a chuckle out of how obscure that topic sounds. At the end of the day though, it was not an obscure topic at the time—we are talking about celebrities amongst Blacks and Whites, who staged financially and culturally successful performances and were well-known enough to have invitations for private performances from the Rothschilds and the British Royal Family. When the average person thinks of turn of the century Black life, they might think share-croppers, Great Migration, Jim Crow. Those are all realities, but so are popular entertainers and more frivolous things—because Black life has always been diverse and complex (something always assumed of White American populations, but rarely of Black ones).

At the same time, I think it’s important for people who work in historical contexts to not get so comfortable in the past that they ignore the present. When I am speaking on archival objects from the past, I do so to inform and complicate understandings of the present. One of the best recent examples of addressing contemporary understandings while exploring a historical document can be seen in [Musical Passage: A Voyage to 1688 Jamaica](#). This project explores some of the earliest transcriptions of African diasporic music in the Americas using two pages from a 17th century book called *Voyage to the Islands of Madera, Barbados, Nieves, S. Christophers and Jamaica*. Decisions like referring to the planter class as “...people involved in

colonizing Jamaica and enslaving Africans in pursuit of profit” might seem trivial, but is a powerful step in discussing archival history without traditional deference to a presumed white readership.

The other role I find incredibly important, personally, is that of someone who is a vocal trained expert who is not easily cowed. This is a role of personal importance because I do not think it is necessarily required of every archivist of color or person working with marginalized people’s collections, but it is one that I try to fulfill as someone with the disposition and positionality to feel comfortable doing so. I have found that many White scholars in a variety of fields assume that people of color who work with materials from their own ethnic/racial/cultural groups are not true scholars—that their expertise comes solely from lived experience and personal opinion. Lived experiences and personal opinions are not without value, of course, but it is important for me to stop those fellow scholars and say “Oh, I hear that you are devaluing my expertise, but we are actually going to talk about this right now.”

I was recently talking to two very intelligent medievalists and said in passing that “race is made up.” They both know me as someone with multiple degrees and professional experience working with archival materials, but one of them immediately scoffed and brought up the dreaded specter of “internet social justice warriors.” I could tell this was something I was supposed to let slide, but instead began a discussion on the undefined “white person” of the 1790 Naturalization Act and the various court-cases and social movements that followed in attempts to create meaning for “white person.” This type of intellectual and emotional labor is, in brief, a pain. I personally find it remarkably important, however, to use my role as a researcher and archivist to plant Black history firmly in the minds of fellow scholars who might, consciously or not, attempt to ignore the historical and archival record solely because they don’t understand or like the 21st century discourse around race.

**JJ: Given that talking such issues through over and over again for the larger social good is, as you note, a pain—even as it is also remarkably important—I am very thankful that you were willing to speak to them so eloquently here in the context of your work. In further shaping your understandings of them and in the professional practice that you pursue around them, did you find mentors and allies here at IU during your studies? My hopeful self hopes so, but my worried self worries “not-so-much.”**

DB: I don’t know that I’d say I found mentors but that is mainly because my personality doesn’t really seek out that sort of individual one-on-one relationship, for better or for worse. I found many, many people who provided intellectual, professional, and sometimes even emotional support, however. Within the department of Folklore and Ethnomusicology, [Fernando Orejuela](#) has always been a great champion and someone with whom I could discuss navigating the racial and social problematics of academic life. My time working at the Mathers was fairly instrumental as well, because I had the opportunity to talk with people working with collections, exhibitions, curation. I found everyone there very supportive of professional intentions/potential and was given a lot of opportunity to discuss processes and learn. In the other degree side, I spent a lot of time working with [Andy Uhrich](#) and [Brian Graney](#), of the University Film Archives and Black Film Center/Archives respectively. They were very much super-allies of the Dorothy-cause, providing again that combination of education and professional freedom that I think is

really valuable for graduate students. Graduate students need to learn huge amounts, obviously, but without hands-on projects the job market outside of academia doesn't really care how many papers you've read. There are other professors, [Judah Cohen](#) in the [Jacobs School](#) [of Music], [Terri Francis](#) in the [Media School](#), who really encouraged and challenged me intellectually.

I think there are definitely people at IU who presented serious problems for me, but that is to be expected in life! It is an effort to find and pursue the people that can add to your experiences, but for me it was certainly worth it.

**JJ: I am obviously glad that the MMWC provided some of the useful opportunities that you drew upon and took advantage of. I am also glad that you took the [Curatorship](#) course and then followed up with hands-on projects at the museum. Engaging a diversity of people and organizations seems to be one key lesson that I read out of your experience. I know that the museum and I benefit from the diversity of students and other stakeholders with whom we engage.**

**In your new role, you are encountering many different collecting organizations, collections, and collection items. Is there one—at any of these levels—that has really struck a chord with you and that you would like to narrate? (This is the “favorite object” question reworked in an archival context, of course.)**

DB: I'm so fresh into the position I haven't had too much to explore, but in my first week I came across some really interesting holdings in the [Social Welfare History Collection](#). I was pulling files and enriching metadata from a large collection called the Verne Weed Collection for Progressive Social Work, that holds the papers for a variety of activist social workers. That collection contains the Jack Kamaiko Papers, and a subsection of those papers were marked as relevant. The files all had titles along the lines of “USS New Orleans Segregation,” so I originally thought, “Hmm maybe this is someone who was fighting against segregation in the Navy? Maybe a lawyer, maybe someone who was discriminated against themselves?” When I looked through the first file, however, it was all correspondences dealing the the purchase of the Senator Hotel in New Orleans. I had no idea what that could possibly have to do with anything. I tried Googling, and came up with maybe two relevant results that all hinted at the real story.

In the 1940s, the [United Seamen's Service](#), a non-profit that works for the welfare of seafarers by providing services and local information, attempted to purchase the Senator Hotel to provide recreation and temporary housing for both African American and White seamen. Though the housing would be separated into two segregated wings, with separate entrances, local forces in the French Quarter railed against the close proximity. Jack Kamaiko, who would later go on to become a well respected professor at Hunter College's School of Social Work, was employed by the United Seamen's Service and kept letters, telegrams, and ephemera detailing the eventually unsuccessful purchase. These kinds of materials are exciting because while they are accessible at this point to scholars who know where to look, once they are digitized and added to Umbra Search they will be easily discoverable for anyone simply searching for “Segregation in New Orleans.” That kind of fleshing out of the historical record, showing the ongoing fights for fair treatment, provide the “vindicating evidence” that [Arturo Schomburg](#) described as his intellectual pursuit. Evidence that Black history is now and has always been, American history.

**JJ: That's an interesting collection and a great point to close on. Thank you so much for sharing your work with me.**