

# Imagining Futures Through the Archives

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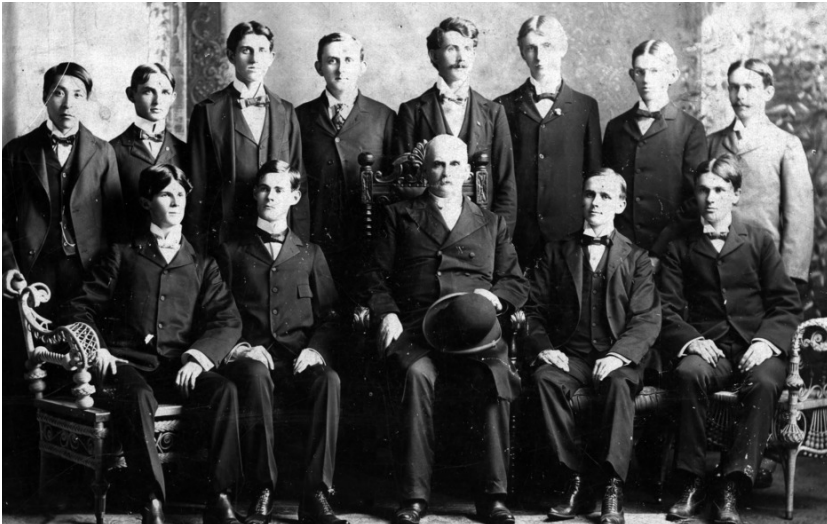


**Figure 1:** Justina Williams conducting genetics research<sup>1</sup>

We can agree, I think, that invisible things are not necessarily “not-there”; that a void may be empty, but is not a vacuum. In addition, certain absences are so stressed, so ornate, so planned, they call attention to themselves; arrest us with intentionality and purpose, like neighborhoods that are defined by the population held away from them.

Toni Morrison<sup>2</sup>

During the summer of 2019, I was searching through the archives at the North Carolina State University Libraries' Special Collections and Research Center for materials pertaining to Justina Williams. Justina Williams was the first African American academic staff member hired at NC State in 1958—starting her work in the midst of the Jim Crow era and working in the lab of Dr. Kenichi Kojima, a Japanese faculty member in the Department of Genetics during this time. Thirty years later, she retired as the department's Head Research Technician. Although I was not able to find any new traces related to Justina Williams, she did lead me to other fragments pertaining to Asian faculty and scholars. Asians and Asian Americans are almost absent in our collections. This reflects their small demographic population and also dominant narratives of campus history itself, which often center the lives, voices, and perspectives of white men. After nine months of digging through the digitized archives, I developed a historical timeline on Asian and Asian Americans at NC State that is open-sourced and available to anyone with internet access. The Historical State timeline identifies significant figures and moments in the history of the Asian and Asian American community at NC State. The timeline includes information and links to digitized materials, such as photographs, yearbooks, enrollment data, and more. There are also other timelines documenting the history of African American, Native American, GLBT and Latinx communities at NC State. As a Black archivist and librarian, this kind of work is the type of intervention I have been thinking through in order to recognize and address the gaps and silences that exist in the archives. Teaching students and researchers both within and outside of our institution how to approach and engage with archival materials provides a way to contextualize the present and help imagine different kinds of futures, especially now in the time of COVID-19 and the past month's (July 2020) movements naming racial injustice.



**Figure 2:** College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts Class of 1898<sup>9</sup>

Archivists and special collections librarians are in a unique position to help researchers think through the shifts and turns of current events by decentering whiteness and amplifying the voices that have been buried in the archives. Libraries and archives are often seen as depoliticized spaces that view their mission and goals as neutral and objective. However, librarians and archivists of color have long argued that given their institutional history, policies, and practices of exclusion, archives and libraries are in fact not neutral, transparent, comprehensive, nor easy to access even today. For example, Professor Jason Miller's research on the absent records of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s visit to NC State in 1966 reveals how white supremacy has shaped what is deemed worthy to preserve. Once we recognize that archives were designed through policies and practices of systemic racism, then we can better understand what is present and visible in the archives and, perhaps more importantly, what is not. How do we confront and address these voids? Knowing that such shortcomings exist, what can archivists do to reconcile these gaps, silences, and unknowns?

One way I have attempted to address these missing narratives and memories is by conducting archival literacy instruction that centers the lived experiences of underrepresented communities. Facilitating critical conversations about how issues of voice and gaze shape the creation of collective memory provides students a useful framework to understand modes of power. By this I mean, critical archival analysis provides context to contemporary issues by connecting us to stories and images of the past that are not part of the dominant narrative. Curated information, like the historical timeline and similar digital public platforms, help make primary sources accessible to users remotely.

Archivists are positioned to be interdisciplinary and multi-modal, and so I have also been working to establish meaningful and sustainable relationships with campus partners for collaborative projects. One important lesson I learned from my experience with community building in academia is that all work about communities of color should be in constant dialogue with those communities. This same practice should also apply to archives when building collections and other works of memory. Through intentional outreach and community building efforts, I collaborated with the Women's Center and African American Cultural Center on campus to help build content for the Women Center's annual exhibition. The theme for this past academic year was titled *Existence as Resistance: The Magic in Blackness*, where NC State students, staff, and faculty, and community members were invited to think and create radical Black futures through an Afrofuturist lens. Incorporating digitized images from the university archives, we created a section in the exhibit titled "Reimagining Black Futures Through the Archives." Viewers saw historical images of Black life both on and off campus. Our themes invited viewers to critically reimagine these historical records and speculate futures in which Black people live out fully realized lives.

As Toni Morrison states above, "a void may be empty, but is not a vacuum." It is imperative that archivists and researchers think beyond what is simply absent from the archives, and continue to focus on how much calculated ef-

fort and intention was enacted to exclude others in order to build the archives. The work of dismantling dominant narratives cannot be solely rectified by somehow hastily filling the gaps in the stories. Rather we must ask ourselves what structures and policies have been and are currently in place today that reinforce and reproduce institutional racism. A reckoning of the archives and archival practices must first take place before any premature reconciliation. We may not be able to fill the voids of individuals or groups in the archives, such as Justina Williams; yet her presence, like so many absented from the archives, tells us much about the systems of power that created such voids in the first place.

## Notes

1. University Archives Photograph Collection, Student Life Photographs, 1893-1997, UA023.025, Special Collections Research Center, NC State University Libraries

2. Morrison, Toni. "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature." *The Source of Self-regard: Selected Essays, Speeches, and Meditations*. Knopf, 2019, p. 173.

3. University Archives Photograph Collection, People, UA023.024, Special Collections Research Center, NC State University Libraries