

**GAMMAS
INSTITUTE**



**ARTS
CULTURE
CIVIC
ENGAGEMENT**

About the collection

The Pan-African library of CANVAS Institute is the only collection of books on Staten Island devoted to the experiences of people of African descent. Some books are seminal works of scholarship and literature that have changed American history; others are popular best-sellers and celebrity biographies that illuminate the impact of black life throughout the world. The collection began with a donation of over 800 books donated by the Givens family. It reflects a wide-ranging, erudite, and cosmopolitan interest in the ever evolving experience of black life.

The books in the Pan-African Library are shelved and catalogued according to the Dewey Decimal Classification System. Within this catalogue and on the shelves, they are grouped under these categories: Fiction and Literature; Sports; Music and Entertainment; Slavery and Abolition; African History and Culture; United States History; 20th Century Civil Rights; Race and Society. The names of these categories are found on the shelves as well, starting with Fiction and Literature on the upper left hand shelf and ending with Race and Society on the lower right hand.

Although the Pan-African library includes first editions and reprints of books published before 1900, a striking number of books were published in the late 1960s, reflecting the surge of publisher and readers' interest in African-American issues during the civil rights movement. Accordingly, the library is exceptionally strong in **20th Century Civil Rights** literature, represented by numerous collections of Martin Luther King's speeches and writings as well as Taylor Branch's multivolume history of the King years. The books in this section also introduce readers to books by radical figures from this era such as Stokely Carmichael, Dick Gregory, Amiri Baraka, Eldridge Cleaver, as well as by Shirley Chisolm, the Brooklyn Congresswoman who became the first black woman to run for President. The Pan-African library is the record of civil rights movement whose intensity and focus was matched by its literature.

A fitting companion to the books in this section are the many works of sociology, urban studies, and critical race studies categorized under **Race and Society**. Many of the books in this section were written with the intent of understanding, analyzing, and tracing back the racial strife that gripped the country throughout the 20th century, starting with W. E. B. DuBois's classic *Souls of Black Folk*. Other books are dated today by their reliance on white perspectives, like Gunnar Myrdahl's *An American Dilemma*, and their focus on "the inner city," such as Kenneth Clark's *Dark Ghetto*. The collection also shows the impact that African-American academics and black feminists made on the study of the "race problem" with many books by bell hooks and Angela Davis.

The **Fiction and Literature** section includes titles from the flowering of black women's publishing in the 1970s and 80s. The Pan-African Library has a remarkable collection of fiction by Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, and Alice Walker as well as classics by James Baldwin and Zora Neale Hurston.

The rich variety of biographies and autobiographies grouped under **Sports** and **Music and Entertainment** reflects the importance of these popular books to social change. For generations of American readers, the life story of sports heroes such as Jesse Owens, Jackie Robinson, and Muhammad Ali and the biographies of entertainment giants like Sammy Davis Jr., Sidney Poitier have been essential civil rights literature. The wealth of titles in this section reflect the incredible impact of black Americans in these industries.

An earlier generation of autobiographies by nineteenth century antislavery leaders like Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth are found in **Slavery and Abolition**. Also included in this section is an

impressive variety of books written during this time period about the slavery problem that split the United States. The Pan-African library has sufficient number of books devoted to this crucial period in American history to merit a separate section of its own.

The largest collection of books in the Pan-African library are categorized under **History**, a reflection of the fascinating scholarship in black life since the Emancipation and the broader history of African-Americans. Readers will discover many classic works on the crucial period of Reconstruction in the late 19th century, the “Great Migration” of the early 20th century, as well as African American military history throughout the 20th century. Included in this section are anthologies and catalogues of notable figures in black history as well as biographies and autobiographies by historically significant figures such as Barack Obama and Thurgood Marshall.

An important contribution to non-Western histories and literature of black people is made by the books gathered under **African History and Culture**. The Pan-African library gives readers the chance to shift their perspective and learn first-hand about the continent that has shaped our community.

The Pan-African library’s unique mix of titles and categories is a window into the rich tapestry of Pan-African experience. The library will no doubt grow and change with the community that enjoys it.

When picking up books from shelves at a library for research or some other task, one doesn't really focus on how a particular book ends up in a particular location. After my summer at the CANVAS Institute, the way I look at a library has changed dramatically. I also have a newfound respect for librarians and the hard work that they put in to make sure everything is organized so that a library can be utilized easily. With Ms. Dorothy, I learned that when cataloging, tags or subjects have to be established for the entire collection before working on each book individually. This requires some thought and consideration of factors such as the main objective or theme of the library. When this is done, every book needs an online description, including characteristics such as cover-type, publication, publication date and the most infamous, the dewey number.

While at CANVAS, the phrase "problem book" was commonplace. When facing a problem with a book, most of the time it was usually due to the fact that the dewey number wasn't easily searchable. Decisions had to be made on how to classify and fit these "problem" books into the collection. Although we didn't face too many problem books, they still managed to haunt Ms. Dorothy and I. I can only imagine what a librarian has to go through with tons of more shelves. Decisions also had to be made about which tag best fits with a book. In a few cases, I found that some tags overlapped with a certain book. However, from Ms. Dorothy, I learned that there is no one correct tag as different people will have different opinions. One just has to make a reasonable choice. Decision making, for me, was a major learning point this summer. Simply, in some cases, one should focus more on making a rational decision than dwelling on whether a decision is right or wrong. This will be a very important lesson to take with me to college.

I had a chance to learn, through Ms. Dorothy, about authors who were significant voices in their respective time periods. For instance, while working on James Baldwin's *Nobody Knows My Name* and *Notes of a Native Son*, Ms. Dorothy described his role and contribution to Twentieth Century Civil Rights. I also got the chance to read some of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, a novel that allowed me to get in touch with my own culture, uncover multiple lessons and even laugh a little.

Ultimately, I am grateful to Mr. Ambrosino and Bobby for giving me the platform for such a productive experience and to Shereese, Ms. Dorothy and Dr. Fanuzzi for amplifying the overall experience.

Obinna Jefferson Nwosu

On February 24, 2018 Canvas Institute launched the Pan-African Library (PAL) to inspire and create conversations about the history and influence that peoples from African descent have had on America and the world. PAL represents the opportunity that we have as a community to learn from the past and appreciate the contributions of the African diaspora. Our collection represents the complexities of black culture, politics and intellectual thought over two hundred years. What constitutes Pan-Africanism often changes according to whether the focus is on art, politics, ideology, organizations, or culture. At a basic level it is a belief that African peoples both on the African continent and in the diaspora, share not just a common history, but a common destiny. An interconnected past and future that has led to a sense of community.

Pan-africanism - that sense of community - is needed on Staten Island, and we are thrilled to provide this resource. PAL is a part of our mission to continue to educate and celebrate black history. Our programming extends to K-12 students, colleges, universities and adult learning. Our International Book Club provides people of diverse backgrounds with an opportunity to explore classic literature from *James Baldwin*, *Langston Hughes*, *Zora Neale Hurston* while exploring contemporary authors like *Toni Morrison*, *Ta-Nehisi Coates* and *Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie*. We have also developed a community curriculum that provides the community with classes in various subjects in Race & Society, History, Africa & The Caribbean, Sports, 20th Century Civil Rights and Music & Entertainment.

Canvas Institute opened its doors to the public in January 2016, hosting many successful events with great attendance and gaining the attention of local and international press. Leading the charge as the first multidisciplinary arts and culture space in Downtown Staten Island, Canvas seeks to increase the positive impact of community driven artists, scholars, and civic leaders. Canvas' public programs, discussions, and quarterly art exhibits attract local and visiting audiences promoting open dialogue, creativity, and intentional action.

We would like to thank everyone that contributed to our Pan-African Library. A very special thank you to Mr. William Givens and his family for donating over 800 books to this collection, and thank you to their estate lawyer Duane Felton who suggested that these books should have a home at Canvas Institute. We would also like to thank Dorothy Davison for her unwavering commitment and guidance throughout this process. Thank you to Dr. Fanuzzi, and St. John's University for all their support and contribution to the catalog. To Obinna Nwosu, a future leader and an example of the impact PAL will have on future generations - Thank you for your dedication to learning new skills and expanding your mind. Last but certainly not the least, Princess Yates a young woman committed to social justice and cultural awareness. May she rest in peace and may the Pan-African Library serve as a manifestation of her quest to research the culture and history of the African diaspora and its influence on the world.

Bobby Digi
President, CEO Canvas Institute

Shereese Mullings
Program Development and External Director,

In the early spring of 2017 I was asked to evaluate and organize what is now known as the Canvas Institute African American Heritage Collection of books. They were recently donated to the Institute by the family of the late William Givens. Personal book collections are always interesting for what they may reveal about the collector, and this one is no exception. The collection comprises carefully gathered materials, old and new, scholarly and popular, related to the African American experience. Mr. Givens obviously cared deeply about the recorded history of African Americans and collected the materials over a number of years.

The challenge of imposing order on a disparate collection of materials is always daunting and before any work could commence, one fundamental issue had to be considered: what purpose was the collection to serve? Once the purpose was determined – largely curricular programming for K-12 students and community-related programming – other decisions were easier to make. Presently the collection contains approximately 600 volumes, with numerous biographies of historical and sports figures, comprehensive surveys of slavery and abolition, to highlight but two areas of interest to readers. The organization of any collection needs to be clear, logical and, above all, useful. But it is difficult to organize information to serve the needs of a number of different user groups, especially if the collection is relatively modest. The liveliest discussions, therefore, focused on the subject headings needed to make the books more accessible to the user. In this case it was important to serve the serious scholar, educators and students, as well as the casual browser. Compromises were made in the selection of the subject headings, as they always are, but we are confident the best decisions were made under the circumstances. The books were entered into the online database *LibraryThing*, with each volume assigned a classification number and a subject heading or tag. This open access software is ideal for the purposes of the Institute, being both flexible and user friendly – more than suitable for a collection of this size and scope.

Organizing and preparing a book collection for public use is always a labor intensive and time consuming activity involving sorting, data input, labeling and shelving. Thankfully, we had the able and enthusiastic assistance of intern Obinna Nwasu, who quickly learned to recognize groupings of different types of materials, identify genres, and anticipate appropriate call numbers for titles, thereby gaining insight as to the myriad possibilities for organizing information. It has been a wonderful learning experience for all of us involved in the project. Undoubtedly more books will be added to the collection over time and additional decisions will need to be made about handling donated materials, shelving, ongoing maintenance, etc. But they are very likely to be interesting and exciting as well. Everyone involved in this project is confident that the Givens collection will contribute to furthering the mission of the Canvas Institute.

Dorothy Davison