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Centering the Marginal: Toward Inclusivity in the Documentation of Student Struggle Opening Remarks

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Good morning and welcome the Project STAND symposium. My name is Karen Walton Morse and I’m Director of Distinctive Collections and de facto University Archivist here at the University of Rhode Island.

The conveners of this symposium would like to acknowledge that we gather today on the traditional land of the Narragansett People, who have stewarded it throughout the generations, at the flagship university of the state that illegally detribalized the Narragansett tribe in the 1880s. We call upon ourselves to reflect upon and actively address the history of occupation and dispossession, and to commit to learning to be better stewards of the land we inhabit as well.

As a prelude to the day’s program, I would like to take a few minutes to place this symposium in the campus context.

Some of you may have noticed the (unattributed) literary quotations displayed on and in this building. They were carved by John Benson from 1992-1995 as part of a program to provide art for public facilities.

I would like to draw your attention to this one,
which is mounted outside right above the windows over there.

Those of you who are familiar with the quotation – from Malcolm X’s *Autobiography*-- will notice that it has been shortened and taken out of context.

For those of you who aren’t, here’s the unedited version.

I told the Englishman that my alma mater was books, a good library. Every time I catch a plan with me a book that I want to read—and that’s a lot of books these days. If I weren’t out here every day battling the white man, I could spend the rest of my life reading, just satisfying my curiosity—because you can hardly mention anything I’m not curious about.

The inscription was made in October 1992. Sparked by this misappropriation of Malcolm X’s words, in November, over 200 students (some sources say over 300 students) and staged a sit-in at Taft Hall, the beautiful building that seems to sit right underneath this quote. The students, led by the Black Student Leadership Group, presented the university with a list of demands related to increasing diversity and inclusion at the university. Student activism in this case led, among other things, to the creation of the Africana Studies department, the hiring of an affirmative action officer, and a new multicultural center in the center of campus.

The inscription, however, was neither corrected nor attributed.

In more recent years this building itself has been the location of student protest. In the fall of 2010, queer students took over the 24-hour room, staging an 8-day sit-in, in response to the university’s failure to deal with the problems GLBT students, racial minorities, and disabled students faced on campus.

The student submitted a list of demands that included stronger responses to harassment and bullying, better and more training for residence staff and others on campus, hiring of an upper level administrator responsible for diversity and equity issues, and a new, better-staffed GLBT Center.

It seems appropriate that this building, which has both sparked and been the site of student protest, be the site of this event today.

Now it is my great pleasure to introduce…