Topic: Power Within Archives (and Archivists)

Introduction

In the very first week of this class, we read Kathleen D. Roe's presidential address at the 2015 SAA Annual Meeting. She asks an important question to archivists - "which would you rather be: a fascinating treasure or a bulwark (bul-wrk) of freedom?" When I first read this line, I flashed back to conversations with friends, family, random people at parties, most of whom had the same response when I told them my intended career path - "oh, I don't know much about archives, but that sounds super interesting?" Sure, it is interesting, but it's so much more than that - and this class has helped me express that in more recent conversations.

Most archivists – at least theoretically – understand that we wield a measure of power within the archives. In being able to organize, control, and maintain access to records, we essentially shape historical narratives and the way people learn and understand history. However, how much of this power is actually wielded? Despite the theoretical understanding, on a more practical level archives are often seen as neutral repositories of information. Funding, staffing, and institutional practices often limit archivists from being able to stand as "bulwarks of freedom". So, in this presentation, I want to talk about the Power Within Archives.

Power in Archival Theory

How does power manifest in archival theory? We start with the principle of provenance (or *respect des fonds*), which states that records should be kept in their original order and attributed to their creators, preserving the context in which they were created. With this, record creators hold a considerable amount of power in determining the content and focus of what is recorded. The decisions about what information is included, and what is left out, are often driven by the interests, biases, and power structures of the creators. Depending on their identity, following the principle of provenance could reinforce prevailing power structures, creating a narrative that aligns with their interests while silencing others.

This leads to the archival silence, defined as "a gap in the historical record resulting from the unintentional or purposeful absence or distortion of documentation". Indeed, this is what Verne

Harris contends with in “The Archival Sliver”. In his outlining of the SAS’s (South African State Archives) complicity in the absence and erasure of non-Afrikaner history during apartheid, we see this archival silence strengthen the apartheid government and distort the South African collective memory. It isn’t till their transition to democracy that these gaps slowly begin to be filled, and even then, Harris argues that archivists can only present a sliver of a sliver of a sliver of ‘reality’ or ‘history’ to the visitors of their archives (p.65). As such, the archivist’s power lies in deciphering this so-called ‘enchanted sliver’ so they can push back against the prevailing power relations rather than abandon this power for the facade of neutrality. Abandoning or ignoring the power we have only serves to replicate the existing power relations. (p. 85)

The Power in Action

Exercising this power begins with arrangement. We’ve established that the principle of provenance gives power to record creators, but who determines who created a record? That is the archivist. In our class discussions we’ve talked at length about the utility of co-creatoship in records with a contentious subject-creator dichotomy. On one hand, it can mitigate the archival silence that Dorothy Berry so powerfully portrays in her article, allowing Black Americans to more easily locate instances of black joy. On the other hand, it can make communities seem almost complicit in the imperialist acts forced against them, like with indigenous groups in the Canadian State Archives. I don’t have time to adequately argue for one or the other, but I want to highlight that it is archivists who make that choice. Whether for good or bad (or neutral), we dictate who is seen as telling their stories.

Power also manifests in the act of description. Duff & Harris point out how if archives silence certain voices, then our descriptions must strive to respect the rights of all voices. They argue that descriptions are one of the few direct means available to us for troubling and challenging the prevailing power structures. Their framework of a liberatory descriptive standard – one that publicly acknowledges bias, includes archivists as a voice connected to the record, and is of utility to a variety of users – reflects how to effectively wield power in a way that pushes back against the power of creators and records that silence voices.

However, with great power comes great responsibility. Just because archivists have this power, does not mean that we must (or can) become superheroes. Throughout our readings, we have seen how 'cultural competency' can often backfire, leading to archivists assuming they understand the lived experiences of communities that they are not a part of. It can also lead to a sense of self-congratulation of 'saving the marginalized'. The power we hold should be wielded as a soft power, in collaboration with wider communities rather than in isolation. I'm talking about sharing this power. Tai's framework of cultural humility is a good example of this, as she advocates for archivists to open up space for other voices to allow nontraditional forms of expertise to inform decision making. (p.3)

Lessons from Hands-On Experience

Now, let's move on to how I experienced manifestations of power during my projects and experiences.

During my repository visit at the NYPL Archives and Manuscripts division, I looked through materials relating to civil rights research in former Soviet Central Asia. The creator of the papers was Edward Allworth, a Professor of Turko-Soviet Studies at Columbia. I found that the finding aid was written quite neutrally. I'll read it out now: "The Crimean Tatar (Tuh-tar) files focus on members of this ethnic group's 1944 deportation under Stalin's order to Central Asia, and their efforts, beginning in the 1960s, to obtain the right of return. Allworth's support for Crimean Tatar (Tuh-tar) activism is documented in this collection of materials, as are his efforts to record deportees' personal experiences." One could argue that sure, they are Allworth's papers and so the description should be centered on him, but on the other hand, I wonder if more could have been mentioned about these deportees' personal experiences, especially if they're the focal point of the materials? The Crimean Tatars (Tuh-tars) in the United States are the highest number of their diaspora in the Western hemisphere - and most of them are in Brooklyn! Ultimately, individuals looking for these materials will likely be looking to research their history rather than Allworth himself, and the description could reflect that better. [link]

Our processing plan assignment reflects my previous point about archivists exercising power through arrangement. I worked on the papers of Carol R. Lubin, a consultant for employment

service under the National Commission on Unemployment Compensation from 1978 to 1981. The papers themselves were, to me at least, quite dry. I'm not one for in-depth economic figures and analyses, and these materials were exactly that. So, when it came to needing to describe the significance – assign value – to the collection, I figured it would just be for policy and unemployment-related research. And If I were following MPLP, I may have left it at that. However, after doing some more digging, I discovered that Lubin was actually Dr. Lubin – having received a PhD from Columbia University. Dr. Lubin was a careered and highly educated woman, at a time when very few women were either, and her papers stood as evidence of the breaking of gender barriers in academia, public policy, and social sciences in the late 20th century. In taking more time than the 'efficient standard', I was able to shine light on a perspective these materials held that weren't immediately reflected.

But I must now ask – as the ones working on the plan and assigning values, are we truly the ones with the power of choice? Sure, this plan was the first step in assigning a value to the papers, but this power was limited in that I was placed to convince, while even more power is exercised in needing to be convinced. If this were a work environment, perhaps I would have a supervisor that was unhappy I was taking too long on the proposal. Power within the archives, between archivists, is not equal – it is subject to the decisions of head archivists, managers, board members, and the institution as a whole.

The archives event I went to was a great example of exercising power within the limitations of an institution. I visited the Center for Brooklyn History, where their archives team organized a display of their bookplates. Essentially, a bookplate is "a label attached to the inside cover of a book, usually with the owner's name or initials. Each label is unique to its owner." These bookplates were a part of the collections of two librarians for the Long Island Historical Society – Emma Toedteberg (worked 1889 – 1936) and Edna Huntington (worked 1936 – 1960). What made this event especially interesting was that after CBH became a part of the Brooklyn Public Library in 2020, bookplates were removed from their collecting scope. But the archivists were all massive fans of the bookplates, and decided to hold the event so they could share their personal interest in the materials, rather than let them go unnoticed in storage. This once again speaks to how archives and archivists grapple with notions of power and value making. Even though their

institution no longer assigned collecting value to this collection, the archivists nevertheless sought to ensure that they could share something about the materials they felt deeply for.

In conclusion, the power within archives is multifaceted and complex. As archivists, we are not neutral custodians of information, but active participants in shaping historical narratives. Our decisions on arrangement, description, and even what to preserve can either reinforce existing power structures or challenge them. As we've seen through both theory and practice, the power we wield must be approached with responsibility, humility, and collaboration. Ultimately, it's not about simply managing records, but about being mindful of the impact those decisions have on the stories we tell and who gets to tell them. The challenge is how we balance that power with the need for inclusivity (in-clue-civity) and transparency, ensuring that archives can truly serve as a "bulwark of freedom".