

Speaking of Africatown: a case study in community-university partnership in archiving

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What practices of community-based archives can be adopted or adapted by institutional archives and what are the considerations in doing so? There is a growing body of archival research suggesting that community-based archives are ideally situated to assist marginalized groups in identity formation, community solidarity, empowerment and a host of affective benefits that flow from ownership of a group's archival record and resulting validation of a group's lived experiences. What role can institutional archives take in facilitating community-based collecting and can the same affective benefits arise through partnership or collaboration?

Introduction

This project steps in to a small gap in the archival studies research between examination of community-based archives as opposed to traditional 'mainstream' institutional archives where representation of underserved communities is often lacking. Whereas community archives empower all kinds of communities to represent themselves and construct identities autonomously, they are generally positioned in contrast to mainstream repositories where "silences, misrepresentations, and marginalization" of minority perspectives may occur. (Caswell, et al. 2017) Community-based archives can here be understood as grass-roots organizations whose mission is to preserve the documentary history based on some cohesive group identity, whether ethnic, racial, religious, LGBTQ or other identity. These organizations are able to make shared decisions about what is of enduring value, what truly tells their story. They can also regulate how that story is told and by whom. Community-based archives engage the proposition that ethnicity, or identity, itself can function as archival provenance. (Wurl, 2005) A potential limitation of this kind of collecting is its insularity. It can serve a particular community in the ways enumerated above, but exists in isolation from other groups. Its audience and reach may be artificially limited.

As an academic library within a state institution, what steps can we take in our curation and handling of archival materials to actualize a new model of interaction with community partners. Can we employ or modify practices of community-based archives to address the silences in our collections without instrumentalizing them in self-interested ways? Can we partner together with community groups to our mutual benefit?

Problem Statement

The question arose out of the planning for an exhibit in early 2018. I had selected a collection of drawings made by a local artist, Israel K. Lewis III, whose roots lay in the Africatown area of Mobile. The McCall Library holds two small collections of papers from Israel K. Lewis III. These include a short unpublished manuscript received in 2000 and a group of original drawings which had been displayed in the Marx



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Library, received in 2017. Africatown has a very unique history in the United States, and in January of this year it was also very much in the news. The settlement is located on land just north of Mobile that was purchased and founded by formerly enslaved Africans who had been smuggled in to the country aboard the schooner *Clotilda*. The *Clotilda* was the last documented American slave ship. Though the transatlantic slave trade had been outlawed in 1808, Capt. William Foster, with funds from Alabama planter Timothy Meaher, illegally brought 110 captives from the Kingdom of Dahomey (present day Benin) to Mobile, landing in 1860. (Diouf, n.d.)

In the spring of 2018, there were rumors that the wreckage of the *Clotilda* had been found. This coincided with a crescendo in publicity in advance of the publication of Zora Neale Hurston's book *Barracoon*, which tells the story of Cudjo (Kossola) Lewis, the last survivor of the *Clotilda*. Also of local interest was an episode of the PBS program *Finding your Roots* in which musician and producer, Questlove, learned that he is a descendant of the founders of Africatown.

All of these stories were in the public eye and it set the stage locally for high interest in the Lewis exhibit. As I considered how best to engage students, faculty, and community residents with this exhibit, I wanted to allow the community from which the artwork originated to frame the interpretation and discussion surrounding it.

Through this project, I engaged the question of representation, and its affective benefits, in the context of a public university archives. As a public institution, we as faculty strive to engage broad audiences, including students, faculty, and the community at large. There are regularly public events in the library to which this diverse patron group is invited.

One of the hallmarks of community archives is the ability to determine collecting priorities, to construct identity autonomously, and to exercise decision making control over the material collections. (Flinn, Stevens, Shepherd, 2009) How can we, as entities enjoying state sanction, use our position of power to amplify a segment that has less? Is it possible in the organizations we inhabit to demonstrate an awareness of the imbalance of power and the need to cede some of the control, over collection decisions, description, interpretation, and use? Does a social justice approach to archives, as Duff et al. propose, help to address this imbalance?

The Doy Leale McCall Rare Book and Manuscript Library is actively pursuing an agenda to drive campus-wide engagement with questions of diversity, equity and inclusion. With campus partners such as Student Affairs, the Campus Diversity Officer, and interested faculty we are taking programmatic steps to broaden conversations around equity and representation. This project rests in that framework.

Methodology

“Archives can both produce and reproduce justice and injustice in the decisions they make on how they shape the past and engage the present.” (Duff et al., 2013)

Duff frames the discussion of the social justice role of archives by examining the exercise of power in the activities that make up archival work. Drawing on and expanding Frey's (2009) articulation of the definition of social justice, Duff describes an archival approach to social justice as:

Recogniz[ing] systemic inequalities... and employ[ing] resources ...to challenge and change these structures of exclusion, marginalization and domination. This framework proceeds from a recognition that contestations over recordmaking (including what gets recorded and how it gets recorded) and recordkeeping (including how records and other information objects are managed selected, controlled, accessed, and preserved) implicates social justice endeavors.

Through the work of collecting, describing, disseminating, and engaging with archival materials are we contributing to "structures of non-recognition and marginalization" (Duff et al., 2013)?

In the context of the Africatown exhibit and with the concerns Duff presents in mind, I began to consider the question of how to provide context for the artwork. My first step was reaching out to the chair of the African American Studies program, Dr. Kern Jackson. We discussed the art, the context of its production, and the community of Africatown in Mobile's history. All of this information was useful in thinking about how to represent the art for the exhibit. Dr. Jackson's suggestion that the art was nationalistic in nature led me to include in the exhibit a book on West African art motifs including a variety of masks, which Lewis includes among his subjects. Finally, Dr. Jackson suggested inviting a local storyteller, lay historian, and descendant of the Africatown community to speak not about the art, but with it.

Ms. Lorna Woods was invited to campus to speak about her own life, her experience of growing up in Africatown, her knowledge and sense of pride in her ancestry. She arrived wearing brightly colored wax-printed caftan and head covering. She spoke about childhood recollections and interactions that were impactful. Although there was no direct interaction between Woods' talk and Lewis' artwork, i.e. she did not refer to it or comment on it, Woods and Lewis' kinship relation, embrace of traditional West African material culture and common roots in Africatown, presented to viewers and attendees an artistic and folkloric experience of value. The archives paid an honorarium to Ms. Woods in recognition of her commitment of time and expertise.

In this project I collaborated first with campus partners who helped me make a connection to the community, and then with members of the Africatown community directly to mitigate the problem of interpretation for the exhibit. This opened the possibility of offering our audience unmediated communication from members of the Africatown community, it allowed the institution to hand over the mic, step to the background and listen.

By employing strategies of a social justice stance, it may be possible for institutions to cede some control, invite the collaboration of community partners, embrace consultation with cultural 'stakeholders' (not just financial ones) in hopes of creating a more nuanced, more representative, archival record. If constituencies view the university archives as an ally that can act as steward for community-based materials without usurping the role of narrator, they may be more likely to embrace collaboration. This furthers the McCall Library's institutional goal of fully documenting the communities we inhabit.

Results

To assess this project, I took a multimodal approach. At the event, archives staff collected demographic data, as well as an observational assessment of audience engagement based on whether or not they asked questions, and the amount of time spent viewing the exhibit. Of a total number of 60 participants (an excellent number for a daytime, library event) 27 were students, 15 were from the larger community including other Africatown residents, and 18 were faculty or staff of the university.

Findings

Per staff observations, the audience was engaged and several people asked questions. In addition, patrons stayed to view the exhibit afterward and lingered in conversation. One final layer of responses was gathered by Prof. Jackson who offered his students extra credit to write a reflection essay after the event. Only 4 students took this opportunity, but the essays included the following insight, “The artwork presented had an effect on me by bringing me to the realization that the Lewis descendants coming from Africa, brought what they knew and incorporated it into the making of a Mobile community, called Africatown.” (University of South Alabama student, 2018) This student response demonstrates a synthetic understanding of exhibit and speaker presentation and perhaps even an expanded view of Mobile’s past. It demonstrates the resonance between the artwork of the exhibit and the spoken presentation evoking the lived experience of a community member. A second student essay amplified this very observation, “Were the speech given alone, for instance, we would only have received the stories of the survivor -- without any visual aid to help us get an insight of just how complex and deep the cultural roots of her relatives still ran during her lifetime.” (University of South Alabama student, 2018). Another student expressed that, “Lorna Woods gave the perspective of empathy by her explained personal events she went through in her life.” This is a simple but important recognition, and perhaps not one that could have been conveyed through the exhibit alone with labels created by archives staff. This is the affective benefit that Caswell et al. (2017) discuss in the context of community archives. This self-representation opens an imaginative possibility for viewers, especially those of a marginalized group.

An additional and unexpected result was that several months after the Woods event, we were approached by the project manager of a non-profit organization (C.H.E.S.S. Community Inc.) serving Africatown. She brought a proposal for a community-mapping project of Africatown. (McArthur, 2018) The project’s immediate goals are to engage community members in locating and evaluating the present community resources with a view toward improving services to residents of Africatown, their health status, community cohesiveness, and civic pride. We agreed to contribute funding and expressed our hope to act as steward to some of the research product with the goal of providing long-term preservation and broader access. In this way, we proposed to support the project through funding, preserving, and providing expanded access to the resulting work. If we are able to move forward, we will have succeeded in amplifying the work of the community, using our institutional platform to support community-centered efforts at documentation.

One test of this model will be finding mutually beneficial terms of partnership and striving for continuity of association. The McCall Library has access to specialized facilities and trained staff who are able to assure preservation for the lifecycle of the resources. In addition, we can make resources accessible to

different audiences, broadening the potential reach of the project. Finding balanced terms of partnership will be the point at which we, as the institution, will have to demonstrate the ideals in practice – by respecting the community’s ownership of the project, their determination of collecting priorities and ultimately their own control over the resources. Suggestions in this direction might include detailed collaboration on the process of description – ensuring that cataloging reflected a community-oriented perspective; communication and partnership in shaping the publicity and dissemination of collection materials; and sponsorship of programs and events with the potential to directly benefit the community.

Conclusion

This set of activities focused on one specific feature of community-archiving practices. It directly addresses the question of authority and the possibility of respectful collaboration between community and institution. Providing the platform for Ms. Woods to speak authoritatively about her own knowledge and experience of Africatown locates the community as the source of that authority. (Understanding that she spoke as an individual and not as a designated community representative.) Woods talked about the way the neighborhood functioned, sharing recollections on the use of church bell to communicate coded messages to the community, and timekeeping according to the passing trains. She shared personal memories of a beloved teacher that gave context and subjectivity, enhancing visitors’ understanding of the context. Some of this additional information, context and description was added to catalog records of the Lewis papers as a result, and we renewed contact and updated the gift letters from Mr. Lewis.

The McCall Library can reach a broad audience, offering to students, faculty, and other Mobile residents a point of contact with the Africatown community. Programs like this one give us a chance to act as stewards with resources and facilities for active preservation of archival material while acknowledging that ownership of the history and authority reside with the documented. (Wurl, 2005) The record of the event, photographs and publicity, also become a part of the ongoing story of Africatown and the McCall Library collaborations.

While this is an important early step, there is room for much more research and experimentation with other tools and strategies of community participation. As an institutional archives, we benefit from a thoughtful consideration of the values that are reflected in our praxis. “If we are charged with building archival resources on particular cultural groups, it matters little how we do this if we haven’t really wrestled with the broader questions of why and with whose authority.” (Wurl, 2005) Wurl goes on to propose that recognizing ethnic communities as an ‘originating source’ of materials, as provenance, acknowledges an important feature of collective identity. This conceptual framework helps to more fully elaborate the context that makes an archival fonds comprehensible to users, and recognizable as part of a “process of collective remembering.” (Wurl, 2005)

A recent development in this endeavor was the rejection by the C.H.E.S.S. project board of the McCall library’s proposal to offer funding and partnership. The concern expressed was in turning over the maps to the University, though this was not a stipulation of our contribution to the project. This demonstrates a communication failure, and that the institution was perceived as asking too much. It indicates that there is still much ground to cover in building trust among the parties, in understanding each other’s objectives, It may be that continued discussions will yet yield a path forward.

Any assessment of this part of the project will be for future analysis, but my hope is that we can be flexible enough to work together and preserve resources that will be in some way “jointly held and invested in by both repository and originator.” (Wurl, 2005) The mission of representative archives that preserve the wealth of our communities’ archival record depends on it.

Resources

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