

Describing Disability in Houghton Library's Theatre Collection

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Harvard University's Houghton Library is home to a robust Theatre Collection, including documentation of performers with disabilities who appeared in popular entertainments such as circuses, sideshows, and "freak shows". Since October of 2020, as part of Houghton's "Year of Professional Engagement", I have been engaged in a year long project to research the ways disability studies informs archival work, evaluate Houghton Library's archival description for people with disabilities (performers and otherwise), and prepare best practice guidelines for revising and creating new description.

Through the work I have done so far, I've learned that reparative description is only a small part of archivists' responsibility to accurately, sensitively, and respectfully steward materials of disabled people who, in life and death, were often exploited, excluded, and othered. In addition to reassessing the language we use in our finding aids, we must also examine our reasons for collecting these materials, the ways in which we present and exhibit them, and their potential uses by researchers. Are we merely preserving history, or are we also preserving injustices -- of the past and present? In my presentation, I will talk about how I'm trying to tackle these questions that we must ask if we are committed to doing our best by these materials, the individuals who they document, and the researchers who will use them.

About the author:

Annalisa Moretti is a Project Archivist at Houghton Library, Harvard University. She has a Master of Science in Library Science and Archives Management from Simmons University and a BA in English from Rhode Island College. Previously she worked as an Archives Specialist at the John J. Burns Library, Boston College, a Collections Assistant at MIT Institute Archives, and an Archives Intern at Drew Archival Library. She served as the Website and Social Media Coordinator for the Roundtable for Early Professionals and Students at New England Archivists from 2014-2016 and as co-chair for the NEA Fall 2016 Annual Meeting.