

Aspirations and Realities: Piloting Shared and Equitable Collecting at Columbia University Libraries by Celeste Brewer and Kimberly Springer, PhD¹

Presentation transcript

Introductions

C. Brewer: I'm Celeste Brewer, a processing archivist for the Rare Book & Manuscript Library at Columbia University Libraries.

K. Springer: And I'm Kimberly Springer, curator for oral history, for the same library unit.

C. Brewer: Together we decided to collaborate on a project that would take into account, at that time, emerging conversations about enacting inclusive and reparative practices. This pilot on Shared and Equitable collecting was meant to counteract a tradition of institutional harm in the form of buying and/or accepting donations of collections that removed them from the creators' communities.

K. Springer: This type of removal disadvantages creator communities by hampering easy access to materials in faraway, symbolically (and sometimes *literally*) gated institutional repositories, such as Columbia University Libraries. In this short presentation, we briefly outline our objective, methodology, and outcomes.

Objective

C. Brewer: Against the backdrop of the 2020 Uprisings, we developed a Shared Equitable Collecting pilot to: 1) interrupt extractive collecting practices and 2) redirect funds from acquiring new materials towards developing access strategies for reparatively sharing materials with impacted communities.

¹ For questions or comments, please contact: oralhist@library.columbia.edu with "NYAC 2024 presentation" in the subject line.

Methodology

C. Brewer: We collaborated to...

- adapt the Libraries' acquisitions award proposal to make an argument for less acquiring and more attention to equitable collecting practices
 - We were awarded \$3500 to digitize roughly one linear foot of archival materials (about 2500 images)
- reprocessed a sample collection that was removed from the creators' geographic and cultural context. In this case we selected the Darcus Howe papers, which were purchased by Columbia in 2009 and originally processed in 2011.
- entered into a dialogue with the creator's Estate, co-creators of materials, and publishing partner, The Race Today Collective
- updated the repository's Acquisitions Proposal Form, which was first created in 2015, to include prompts for Curatorial staff to create their own plans for continued access to materials and accountability to creators and their communities

Analysis (main paragraph)

K. Springer: In our proposal, we critiqued the existing acquisitions award criteria, and advocated for CUL to move toward implementing a reparative archival framework in acquisitions and throughout our collections stewardship work. La'el Hughes-Watkins' 2018 article "Moving Toward a Reparative Archive" (which coined the term) informed our work, as did that of archivists including Dorothy Berry, Bergis Jules, and the Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia Anti-Racist Description Working Group.

Analysis (reprocessing)

C. Brewer: As the Processing Archivist, I found that the Darcus Howe Papers' existing description prioritized documentary forms and excluded key contextual and provenance information. Accession records called the collection the "Darcus Howe Collection on C. L. R. James," whose papers we also hold. This gave the impression that curatorial staff at the time were not aware of Darcus Howe's significance in the Black British/Black Panther Movement and as a public intellectual in his own right. Much of the reprocessing work involved identifying and explicating materials' contexts of creation and connections to Darcus Howe's own life and work.

Reprocessing work included:

- A new arrangement scheme based on materials' relationship to the creator's activities and interests
- Expanded scope and content notes identifying the individuals, organizations, events, political movements, and activities that the collection documents
- An inventory of audiovisual materials, which are extensive: Darcus Howe worked as a journalist in both print and television. The collection includes VHS tapes of much of his work, including his collaboration with writer and political activist Tariq Ali, *The Bandung File*. This inventory was not included in the earlier finding aid.
- Related materials notes for collections outside of Columbia—all of which are in London, at the George Padmore Institute and the Black Cultural Archives—and are related to Darcus Howe's own career as an activist rather than his connection with C.L.R. James.

Analysis (digitization)

K. Springer: We chose not to pursue digitization of the full collection for several reasons. Cost was important, but we also specifically envisioned this project as a proof of concept that could be iterated on by other repositories. We tried to build flexibility into the project so that we could be responsive to needs expressed by the Estate, the Darcus Howe Legacy Collective, and potentially other community partners wishing to host or exhibit the reprocessed materials.

It turned out the Estate and their publishing collective had their own existing project related to digitizing issues of the journal *Race Today*, edited by Darcus Howe from 1974 until 1985, and thereafter by Leila Hassan Howe, his wife. We were happy to contribute digitized issues of the journal from the Darcus Howe papers to the project.

We did need to do some of our own best guessing about which material was likely to be of interest, though. We selected the collection's materials related to the 1971 Mangrove Nine trial, in which Darcus Howe and eight other defendants were charged with "riot and affray" following a protest against police brutality and disproportionate targeting of Black Londoners. Steve McQueen's *Small Axe* dramatized the trial and aired during the 2020 Uprisings in response to the death of George Floyd and continued police violence against black, brown, and poor

communities on behalf of The State. There were disheartening echoes between the UK and US, which made the Mangrove trial documents particularly resonant.

Results/Findings

K. Springer: Curators are expected to think through the collection acquisition form with donors and creators prior to formal acquisition and accessioning. The Equitable Collecting and Access component was intended to help curators anticipate and proactively plan to address barriers to equitable stewardship and access for collections created by individuals and communities from traditionally marginalized groups.

C. Brewer: Equitable Collecting questions include:

- Language of materials: Language can be a barrier to processing and providing reference services. Materials have remained in our archival processing backlog because they are primarily in a language or dialect that processing archivists did not know. Reference services for materials in certain languages are also dependent on the availability of staff members with those language skills, or on subject specialist librarians who have other responsibilities competing for their time.
- Context of creation and primary use: this includes identifying the individual(s) and community/communities who created and originally used the collection.
- Historically overrepresented groups: The list of historically overrepresented groups in our collections and among our users is relatively short and straightforward, and sort of the inverse set of traditionally marginalized identities. This question is meant to prompt curators (and to a lesser extent, creators and donors) to consider whether creators/donors belong to these over-represented groups, and if not, whether providing equitable access to that collection might require additional planning in line with reparative archival principles.
- Equitable Access Plan: exactly what it says on the tin: a plan to ensure equitable access to the collection.

Reprocessing the collection and redescribing it with more robust contextual information drove a significant increase in the physical materials' circulation in the reading room. We actually needed to move it from offsite storage to the onsite stacks because it gets used so often! While the focus of our project was digital repatriation and equitable access, it's gratifying to see access to the collection increase overall as a result of our efforts, too.

Conclusions

K. Springer: Collaborating with Leila and Tamara increased the accessibility of digital surrogates of collection materials in partnership with their own outreach initiative.

C. Brewer: The pilot's work also replaced a transactional interaction with a relationship based in reciprocity and an ethics of care. Our goal was for everyone involved to feel heard and respected in creating a new set of practices and a power-sharing approach to re-presenting the collection for use.

K. Springer: Thank you for your attention. A transcript of this presentation and citations will be available at the New York Archivists' Conference website under previous presentations for 2024.

Citations

Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia Anti-Racist Description Working Group, Anti-Racist Description Resources (October 2019), 1. https://archivesforblacklives.files.wordpress.com/2019/10/ardr_final.pdf.

Berry, Dorothy. "Describing Blackness on a Mass Scale." Presentation in "Toward Culturally Competent (Re)Description of Marginalized Histories," Society of American Archivists Annual Meeting, Washington, D.C., August 2018.

Berry, Dorothy (2018). "Digitizing and Enhancing Description Across Collections to Make African American Materials More Discoverable on Umbra Search African American History." Design for Diversity Learning Toolkit case study. <https://des4div.library.northeastern.edu/digitizing-and-enhancing-description-across-collections-to-make-african-american-materials-more-discoverable-on-umbra-search-african-american-history/>.

Darcus Howe Papers, 1965 - 2008, Finding aid, 2021: https://findingaids.library.columbia.edu/ead/nnc-rb/ldpd_7089617/dsc.

Darcus Howe Papers, 1965 - 2008, Select materials, https://dlc.library.columbia.edu/catalog?f%5Blib_collection_sim%5D%5B%5D=Darcus+Howe+papers&search_field=all_text_teim.

Hughes-Watkins, Lae'l (2018) "Moving Toward a Reparative Archive: A Roadmap for a Holistic Approach to Disrupting Homogenous Histories in Academic Repositories and Creating Inclusive Spaces for Marginalized Voices," *Journal of Contemporary Archival Studies*: Vol. 5 , Article 6. Available at: <https://elischolar.library.yale.edu/jcas/vol5/iss1/6>.

Jules, Bergis. "Confronting Our Failure of Care Around the Legacies of Marginalized People in the Archives." *On Archivy*. November 11, 2016. <https://medium.com/on-archivy/confronting-our-failure-of-care-around-the-legacies-of-marginalized-people-in-the-archives-dc4180397280>

Race Today, RT Studios, Internet Archive: <https://archive.org/details/racetoday> and <https://archive.org/details/ColumbiaUniversityLibraries?tab=collection&query=Race+today>