Building a community of critical practice through reflective reading

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Debates about the role of archives and records in cultural, social and political processes are of long-standing. Since the early 2000s archival theorists and practitioners have confronted the ways in which they have served as "tools for both oppression and liberation" (Caswell, Punzalan & Sangwand, 2017, p.1). Subsequently approaches informed by post-colonialism, critical race studies, feminism, queer theory and deconstructionism have interrogated the role of archives and records in social justice and equity for marginalised and "symbolically annihilated" communities (Caswell, Cifor & Ramirez, 2016). Recent research has emphasised the need to address imbalances of power, to support the 'archival autonomy' of plural voices (Evans et al, 2015), to create collaborative, open spaces in the 'archival multiverse' (Evans, McKemmish & Rolan, 2017) and to generate 'radical empathy' (Caswell & Cifor, 2016).

Critical approaches have been central to this work, in seeking "to liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them" (Horkheimer, 1982, p.244) through reflection and critique. To address archives and records 'critically' is to address the wider social and cultural phenomena with which they are entangled, nationally and internationally (Winter, 2013). In archival studies such approaches are embodied in calls to pluralise and decolonise the archival curriculum (White & Gilliland, 2010; AERI & PACG, 2011) and by liberatory archival activism (Drake, 2016). In the United States the Archivists Against History Repeating Itself movement has brought together practitioners and scholars to disrupt oppressive recordkeeping ideologies and structures in the belief that "we can use archives, archival labour and archival theory for human liberation" (Archivists Against, 2018).

We created the new Critical Archives and Records Reading Group at University College London seeks to actively engage with these debates, taking up the call to action made by Caswell, Evans, McKemmish and others. The group, which is open to all, meets monthly in the Department of Information Studies to discuss an article, paper, podcast or output in any media that is relevant to archives and records studies. Our understanding of relevance is broad, with an emphasis on multi-disciplinary discussion that draws on thinking from outside of the archival field and from outside of academia.

Our aim is to create a space for academics, students and practitioners to critically discuss archival principles and practices, with ambitions to:

  ☐ Encourage reflection on the current state of archives and recordkeeping practice and research using critical approaches from across humanities and social science disciplines

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- Share knowledge and experiences, and challenge and confront assumptions in a safe, open environment

- Discuss practical goals and actions as educators, researchers and practitioners to generate change

- Participate in the "societal grand challenge" of the transformation of archival and recordkeeping practices in pursuit of a more just and equitable world (Gilliland, 2015).

In our first three meetings we have explored white supremacy, queerness and critical feminism as they relate to our field. Our discussions have raised questions about "the nature of records and archives, the foundations and principles which underpin archival practice (for example, preservation, public/private access, stability, gatekeeping and custody), collections development practices, dynamics between institutional and community-led heritage, and the make-up of the archive profession" (Fife, 2019). In various ways, everyday activism within the archival profession emerged as a concern of the group, and we agreed that systemic inequalities and inequities must be tackled from within and without. During a particularly spirited session on 'Feminism in the Archives,' we asked ourselves how we could translate these reflections into our own workplace and research environments: how could we empower ourselves and others in the field to talk about and address these critical concerns? And how can we transform practices in a way that does not appropriate or remarginalize, that recognizes the intellectual contributions of scholars and practitioners outside the archival canon, historically and in the present? As such, it is our intention to build programmes of action emergent from our discussions, capturing and transferring the group's reflexive critique into practice. For example, creating templates of anti-racist, feminist and gender inclusive collections development policies that can be adapted in diverse settings, be they educational, institutional, community etc. Upcoming discussions will consider DIY heritage and commemoration practices.

We hope that future iterations of the group will continue to develop as a useful and independent space for critical reflection at the intersections of theory and practice. We would also encourage other individuals, academic departments, professional networks and peer groups to utilise the reading list we have created as a starting point to enable their own personal and collective reflections on archival practice.

More information about the group and the programme can be found on our website: https://www.ucl.ac.uk/information-studies/critical-archives-and-records-reading-group. Summaries of previous discussions can be also found on this blog: https://diyarchivist.wordpress.com.

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